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ENTERED AT THE POST OFFICE AT NEW YORK, N. Y., AT SECOND CLASS MAIL RATES.

Vol. XXI.

Published Every
Week.

Beadle & Adams, Publishers,
98 WILLIAM STREET, N. Y., January 2, 1884.

Ten Cents a Copy.
\$5.00 a Year

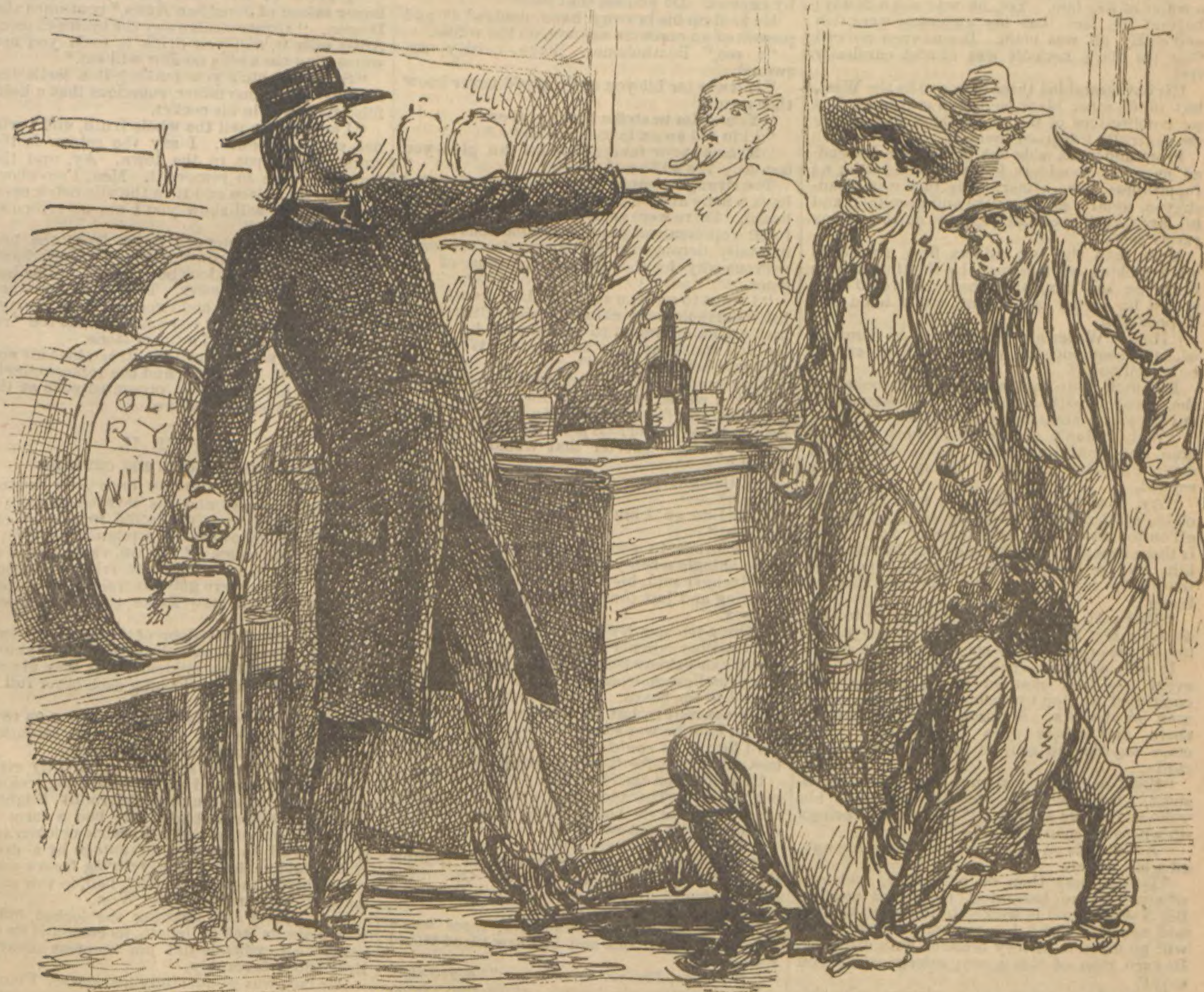
No. 271

STONEFIST, OF BIG NUGGET BEND;

Or, OLD KETCHUM'S TUG OF WAR.

BY CAPTAIN MARK WILTON,

AUTHOR OF "CACTUS JACK," "DON SOMBRERO," "LADY JAGUAR," "THE SCORPION BROTHERS," "CANYON DAVE," ETC., ETC.



"BACK, YOU DEGRADED WRETCHES," EXCLAIMED STONEFIST. "NOT ONE DROP OF THIS VILE STUFF GOES DOWN YOUR THROATS."

Stonefist, OF BIG NUGGET BEND;

OR,

Old Ketchum's Tug of War.

The Story of a Queer Crusade.

BY CAPT. MARK WILTON,

AUTHOR OF "IRON-ARMED ABE," "BARRANCA BILL," "CACTUS JACK," "LONG-HAIRED MAX," "LEOPARD LUKE," "LADY JAGUAR," "THE SCORPION BROTHERS," "BULL-LET HEAD," ETC.

CHAPTER I.

A CRANK IN BROADCLOTH.

Two miners, passing along the principal street of Big Nugget Bend, found their way blocked as a tall, peculiar-looking man rolled a dry-goods case out of Kipp & Turner's store and dumped it near the door. He left a narrow passage and the miners might have gone on, but their attention had become fixed on the man and they looked curiously to see what he would do next.

He was a peculiar-looking man, we have said. Indeed, the miners had never seen another like him in their rough-and-ready border town, in the Colorado mountains, and as he did not look like one accustomed to handling dry-goods cases, they wondered what he intended to do with it.

They were soon shown.

The unknown mounted to the top of the case and stood revealed in all his peculiarities. He looked to be a young man; one would not have placed him at over twenty-five, though it was hard to say positively; and he had a good, though not remarkable form.

His garments were remarkable for Big Nugget Bend, where the majority of the men had not seen a white garment in their hands for months. But he was dressed in broadcloth, the long dress-coat reaching almost to his knees, and his spotless white shirt was surmounted by a collar of like hue. Yet, he was not a dandy; beyond the fact that his garments were rich and costly, all was plain. It was even noticed that his black neck-tie was almost carelessly tied.

His hat resembled those in vogue in the West, but in its sober black color and stiffness called up recollections of the old Quakers, as the miners generally imagined them.

From under his wide hat black hair descended over his shoulders in waveless threads; no foppishness there, either. His face was clean-shaven, square, solid, severe and peculiar; and his large, dark eyes had a sparkle and brilliancy rarely seen.

More than the two miners first mentioned were looking at this man by the time he was fairly on the box, and when one would have passed he thrust out a long, white hand and stopped him.

"Hold! Where are you going?" he demanded, in a keen, incisive voice. "What errand have you now?"

The man addressed, a stout miner, looked at the speaker with a mixture of resentment, curiosity and amusement on his face.

"Wal, I don't generally account fur my goin' and comin' nowadays, but I don't mind sayin' I'm arter a drink o' whisky," he bluntly replied.

"Ay, that is it!" cried the man in broadcloth, suddenly straightening up. "You are all on the down road, every one of you. Who is there here who has not one vice hanging on h'm like a leech? How many of you can truthfully say you scorn the intoxicating bowl?"

"Ther man who don't drink has gone to ther doctor's ter be treated fur ther jim-jams," one of the crowd kindly condescended to say.

It was a larger crowd by that time, for every one that chanced to be passing was compelled to stop by their curiosity to see the man on the box. A dozen men were already there, and others were approaching. Men come together in crowds as naturally as buzzards.

"Scoff on while you may, for your day is short," the unknown steadily resumed, his voice as incisive as ever. "Wickedness springs up wherever man is found."

"An' alights on a dry-goods case," interrupted a big miner.

"Better there than on a scaffold, which is where you are hastening, misguided wretch. Big Nugget Bend is wicked to the core; thieves and assassins tread her streets and her name will go down in history branded with dishonor. Beware, men of this town; reform while you may!"

He made an impressive picture with his peculiar dress, long hair, severe face and quick, nervous features, and as he talked his black

eyes rolled restlessly and gave each man in the crowd a glance.

His last outburst had not fallen agreeably. The miners were proud of their town and objected to having it criticised unfavorably. If Big Nugget Bend was good enough for them to live in it was good enough for this long-haired stranger to visit—if not, he could leave as soon as he saw fit.

So thought the miners, but they held their peace yet a little further. Some took the matter pleasantly, and from such there were remarks intended to be humorous.

"Hyar's Spurgeon Beecher come ter town; burn up yer keards, boys, an' set fur a new deal."

"Ther comin' man has come!"

"Hurrah for Deacon Broadcloth!"

These, and other remarks, arose from the crowd, which every minute increased in size until it was a very good-sized audience for Big Nugget Bend.

The stranger went on in his keen voice, his restless eyes never still, and as the wind tossed his long, straight hair about it seemed, somehow, to mix with his abrupt gestures.

"I hear you ask who I am," he said. "My name is Bartholomew Blake and I have come to Big Nugget Bend to reform the town. I am not a preacher; I follow no creed; I do not preach religion, for religion is a step further than I expect to go. I shall be content when I have reformed every man, woman and child from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Reform is my creed; reform is my life-work. Repent, people of Big Nugget Bar. Bartholomew Blake is here to give you warning. You are on the downward road; you gamble, drink, fight and murder. What a fearful list of crimes! Your town is a hot-bed of sin and you are dragging it further down; it is you, in your wickedness, who must shoulder the blame."

"Now you're shoutin', Deacon Broadcloth," interrupted a big miner. "We must an' we will. We don't allow any outsider ter help us, nor to dictate ter us; nor we won't hev Big Nugget Bar insulted. What you've said is said, but, by ther eternal peaks, you've got ter take it back!"

And the speaker shook his fist at the stranger.

A scornful smile crossed the latter's face.

"Who are you who threatens so bravely?"

"Black Jake, they call me, an' I'm a blizzard by express. Do you see that fist?"

He held up his brawny hand, doubled it and presented an ominous weapon, on the whole.

"I see," Bartholomew Blake calmly answered.

"If 'twas ter hit you onc't, you'd never know ther result."

"You claim to strike heavily, then."

"I kin fell an ox in ther shambles."

"Even at your favorite trick I can give you lessons. We will see!"

The stranger leaped down, the crowd rolled back a little and he picked up a heavy piece of board. There were some who fell further back, for the opinion was gaining ground that he was mentally deranged, but except for his usual nervous way he showed no symptoms of violence.

"I want to see you split this board with your fist," Bartholomew Blake said. "Stalwart men are an ornament to the race, and I would see you strike as you have said. What two men will hold the board?"

They were easily found, and Blake stepped back and waved his hand to Black Jake.

"Split that?" questioned the latter. "What do you take me for? S'pose my fist is made o' stone? Nothin' shorter that would bu'st ther board."

"I thought you claimed to be a powerful striker."

"So I do an' I kin hit her fur double what you kin."

"I venture to assert I shall split that board like a shingle when you have tried and failed," the stranger said, his manner wholly free from boasting and just the same as when he was on the box.

"Got a ten-spot ter bet on it?"

"I neither win nor lose by sinful means. Do you try or acknowledge yourself beaten?"

A growl came from the miner's lips and he turned to the board. He felt perfectly sure he could not split it, but his friends were laughing at him and he was stirred by anger. He had a hard fiat; if he could split the board it would be a great feat, for it was thick and hard.

He calculated the blow nicely and then struck out solidly. The blow was a heavy one and those who held the board reeled back, but in no other way did it show effect.

"Again!" cried Black Jake.

It was held up, and, regardless of possible injury, he struck with all his force. One of the holders reeled, tripped and fell, but the board remained intact.

Not so Black Jake's knuckles; there was a red spot on each one and he knew blood would soon show.

"See hyar, I'm no monopolist," he growled. "I don't batter my heavy out on that plank. I say nobody kin split it unless he's got a fist o' stone. Mebbe, Deacon, you'll try it."

The man in broadcloth remained as calm as ever. Neither the challenge nor the direct application of his sobriquet seemed to stir his blood the quicker.

"I will try one blow—just one," he said.

"Yet, my fist is not made of stone."

He took position and looked keenly at the board. The spectators smiled, expecting to see him fare worse than Black Jake, but Big Nugget Bend believed in justice and the "reformer" should be no exception if he had come to preach without a call.

"Ready!" he said, calmly.

And then his fist shot out like a flash—a short, sharp blow with the weight of the Deacon behind it; and with a crack the board parted from end to end.

He had split it as cleanly as though with an ax.

"Three cheers for the man with the fist of stone!" cried one of the miners, stirred up in spite of himself.

But the applause was not given; Bartholomew Blake had mounted to the case again and his long arms were stretched out over the crowd, his expression indicating that he had forgotten the feat just accomplished.

"When I see men on the downward road I like to stop their wandering steps. My wayward friends, I am here to save you; reform, to-day, and all will be well. Throw away your cards, break your bottles and live an honorable life. I am in Big Nugget Bend to show you your wickedness and I'll do it."

Some one ventured to hint—mildly, because they remembered his heavy blows—that he might wait until he was asked, but the comment was unheeded.

"Your town is a wicked one. The Evil One has his grip on it. If cities were destroyed for wickedness as in the old Bible times, this would be the first to go."

This was putting it rather strongly, and many a miner whispered to his elbow neighbor that if Deacon Broadcloth was tarred and feathered it would be no more than he deserved; but there were enough moderate men there to prevent this dangerous sentiment from taking life.

It was generally acknowledged that the man was deranged, and to maltreat such a person was not the way of Big Nugget Bend.

"He's a crank, but he's harmless," was the general verdict.

"I know of no worse place here than the liquor saloon of Jonathan Ames," continued the Deacon. "Liquor steals away the brains of men. Ames sells it, and you drink it until you are worse than the swine no Jew will eat."

"See hyar, ain't you putting it a leetle too strong?" asked one miner, conscious that a half-filled flask was in his pocket.

"I am here to tell the whole truth, and I will not shirk my duty. I say the saloon is the worst plague-spot in the town. Ay, and the time has come to remove it. Men, I am about to go to that place and turn the vile drink upon the ground; I will show you I am no reformer by words, only."

So saying, he stepped down from the box and, parting the crowd, started for Jonathan's saloon. He did not look behind him, but he had every man for a follower. They knew Jonathan to be a fighting man and expected some fun, not the less so because all were agreed that the "reformer," himself, had a fist of stone.

And as he strode down the street, his hair and coat flying in the wind, and the miners closely following, a picture was presented such as the Bend had never seen before.

CHAPTER II.

THE DEACON BEGINS HIS CRUSADE.

THE "reformer" did not once look around during his journey and his severe face did not change. Even so might some fanatic of old have led his followers on a mission to effect a result in the name of reform, except that in this case the leader could not rely on his companions. They were going merely from curiosity, and Bartholomew Blake could not expect their support.

As he reached the door of Jonathan's saloon and was about to pass the threshold, a young woman came out so suddenly that they almost collided and were left looking each other full in the face.

There was enough to arrest attention on each side, nor did the girl fail to pay due attention to the reformer's singular appearance.

On her own part, she was apparently eighteen years of age, and a more charming looking girl was not to be found in Colorado! Slightly below the average height, she had a form as plump as that of a well-fed prairie-chicken and it was set off to marked advantage by a dress of the plaid variety which, retiring from a well-remembered rage at the East, had, in this case, made its appearance in the West.

Very pretty and dazzling she looked, but it was plain its lack of length, its color and its ornament of ribbons did not impress Deacon Broadcloth favorably.

Her face was wonderfully attractive. Plump, finely formed, with plenty of color, a charming mouth, a shapely nose and large, dark eyes, she

was an object calculated to make male hearts quiver and scorn a bachelor life.

But, to add to the Deacon's dissatisfaction—he evidently deemed beauty a sin—she carried in her hand a flask which was plainly filled with some strong liquor.

The reformer's severe face grew stern and he put out one hand warningly.

"Pause, young woman!" he commanded. "You are on the downward road and going fast. Pause, while there is time! In your hand you hold one of the arch-fiend's strongest weapons. And you are a woman! Big Nugget Bend, my soul cries out in horror for you!"

The girl had plainly been somewhat staggered at the first of this address, and she seemed inclined to retreat into the saloon for protection until a series of winks from the miners enabled her to get pretty near the truth.

"Hailo!" she exclaimed, a saucy smile breaking out on her pretty face, "have you got them, too? Well, you've come to just the right place. Old Daddy Clover is in there and they're crawling all around him. He has got a variety shut up in his boots which he means to ship to Denver for curiosities and—"

"Hold!" interrupted Blake, sternly. "Misguided young woman, this levity is shocking. I am endeavoring to save you from the clutch of the destroyer. I am come to reform Big Nugget Bend. And you, young woman—your wickedness has found you out. Even at the door of this wretched saloon I find you with a flask of vile liquor in your hand."

"Just call it 'vile' in Jonathan's hearing, if you dare," laughed the girl. "Ask him if he sells anything but the pure article—ask him, I say."

"All in good time, for the range of my work is large; but it is to you I talk now. Wretched girl, what is your name?"

"Well, since you ask so politely, I don't mind saying it is Zora Lockyard. But, sir, I have a protector, and he will not allow you to call me pet names. 'Misguided young woman' and 'wretched girl' are 'most too familiar on short acquaintance. You had better take the next stage for Denver, and get yourself locked up where you will be safe. But the best of friends must part, and—I'm gone!"

With the last words the girl glided past him, laughing merrily, and ran down the street.

Bartholomew Blake stretched out his hand toward her, and looked at his followers, his severe face full of lofty condemnation.

"Behold the fruit of your city's wickedness!" he said, in his incisive voice. "Here is a young woman whom nature has kindly gifted, who flaunts her gaudy dress and sinful ribbons in the face of the world, and worst of all, she carries a flask of liquor openly and unblushingly through the streets. This is verily the plague-spot of Colorado!"

"Look-a-hyar, mister," said a rough miner, "look a leetle out bow you kerry on. Don't dare ter say aught ag'in' Zora Lockyard. We all know her here. A girl with a merry nature an' quick o' retort, I allow, but one with a heart o' gold. Her record is clean ez ther water o' Silver Spring, an' she's ther darter o' Father Lockyard, ther money-lender. When any o' ther boyees fall sick, it's Zora that nurses them through it. Ez fur ther liquor, I'll stake my last dollar it is fur Father Lockyard's sicknesses."

There was an approving echo from the crowd, and many a threat was leveled at Deacon Broadcloth, but his face retained its old severity.

"Better die than use the vile stuff," he declared. "There can be no excuse for using it, but you, all of you, are its slaves. Make no excuses; they cannot restore your honor."

Once more there was an impression that the reformer was "drawing it a leetle too strong," and some one suggested bodily revenge at once, but the majority had fully decided that Blake was out of his head, and would not disgrace themselves by touching him.

At his last words, too, he turned and entered the saloon. There he saw a battered-up and used-up old man rapping his boots, upside down, against the bar, as though to empty them of something, while a lank, Yankee-looking man stood behind the bar, laughing heartily.

"I can't get 'em all out, Jonathan," said the old man. "There's a rattlesnake and two racers which I can't account for. They should be hyar, for I see'd 'em not more nor an hour ago."

"Guess the 'tarnal critters has gone up yeour breeches," said Jonathan, good-naturedly; then turning abruptly, he faced Bartholomew Blake, who had advanced to the bar, and added, "What'll yeou drink?"

He meant it for an innocent and polite question, but he never made a greater mistake. The reformer's face was like the front of an iceberg in its cold harshness.

"Vile wretch, have you no sense of shame?" he severely demanded. "Can you not see I am not of the common herd who come here to drink your soul-destroying fluid? Do I—"

"If I have stepped on yeour corns, I'm sorry—darned if I ain't!" said Jonathan. "Of course, yeou want a private room an' a leetle

set-up o' champagne; but, seein' all the boys with yeou, I thought yeou was goin' ter set 'em up fur the house."

The reformer raised his hand with the old gesture.

"Stop!" he commanded. "You are mad, or you would not address me thus. I would not expend one cent in your vile place for all the wealth of Colorado. I have not come to help you thrive, but to destroy the sinful traffic you carry on—to show Big Nugget Bend her wickedness, and lead her in more honorable paths; to tear up the tares which mix with the pure grain—to teach you the difference between right and wrong. You, sir, are the greatest sinner here. You are engaged in a traffic all honest men condemn; you are leading your fellow-beings to ruin, and I cannot find words with which to describe how vile and depraved you are!"

Jonathan had been thunderstruck at first, but as he looked closer at Blake's face and dress, he believed he had arrived at the truth.

"See here, naow," he interrupted; "I've got a word tew put in. Bein' master here, it's nat'ral. Let me tell yeou there can't no spindle-shanked person come here an' tell me how tew run my shop; I won't stand it. Down in Skowhogan, where I come from, we calculate tew protect our rights. Naow, I give you jest thirty seconds tew git out of that door, an' ef yeou sin't gone then I'll sling you out!"

Jonathan was plainly in a towering rage, having failed to catch the drift of the case as the miners saw it. They had winked at him in vain; he saw only a straight-laced parson who wanted to ruin his business.

"Look out, Jonathan, he knows how to use his fists. Two to one he can split your counter with one blow; he's Deacon Stonefist by name."

"Go light; ketch outer his eyes."

"Keep cool; he's a crank."

Such were the remarks addressed to the saloon-keeper, and as he caught the last words his face softened. Whether his business was honorable or not, the man from Maine did not possess a bad heart.

But Blake, disregarding all, had cast a sharp glance about the room. It became stationary as he saw a barrel on the counter, upon the head of which was marked the word "whisky" with the faucet in place.

Three quick strides echoed on the floor, and then, reaching the barrel, Deacon Stonefist gave one twist to the faucet and set the whisky flowing in a stream.

This done, he turned sternly on the crowd.

"Thus perishes a foe to Big Nugget Bend. By such means I save you from yourselves; I put temptation away from you and you cannot wander from the path of rectitude."

Jonathan had stood amazed at this bold act, but a sudden shout from the other men caused Deacon Stonefist to turn again to the barrel. There he saw the cause of the miners' mirth. The old man who had snakes in his boots, but who seldom had money in his pockets, had improved this chance to sample the liquor so freely flowing, and was lying flat on his back and allowing it to run from the faucet into his mouth.

It was a sight calculated to stir any reformer from his equanimity, and it acted on Blake like a spur. He strode forward, grasped the wretched old man, and, lifting him as though he had been a child, cast him one side like a log.

"Look!" he said, "here is what you are all coming to if you keep on your downward path."

The harshness of his manner and the violence to Daddy Clover, who was a favorite, made the miners forget their resolution to deal gently with the reformer. Crank or not, he could not come to Big Nugget Bend and deal thus harshly with their most cherished institutions.

"This is too much; pitch ther critter inter ther street."

"Throw him in ther drink!"

"Run him out of town!"

With these ominous words the crowd surged forward on the reformer. Some remembered the power of his heavy fist, and would rather have been at the rear, especially as he faced them fearlessly.

"Back, you degraded wretches," exclaimed Stonefist. "Not one drop of this vile stuff goes down your throats."

How it would have ended is uncertain, for a new actor suddenly appeared on the scene in the shape of a young man, who faced them resolutely.

"Hold on, boys!" he exclaimed. "What are you going to do?"

"Stand back, Al Sterling; we're going to give this fellow a lesson. Out of the way!"

"I won't 'out of the way!'" was the sturdy reply. "I have come to see the crank, but I didn't think to find him in a struggle with you. Stop, men, and don't do what you will be ashamed of a little later."

The speaker had no small influence at the Bend, and his words recalled to the miners the fact that they had but a moment before resolved not to harm a man so shattered mentally.

Deacon Stonefist was released, but he stood quietly, neither smiling nor looking relieved. His gaze was on the face of Al Sterling, which was a good one, with the maily stamp of twenty-four years upon it; and the latter was moved to take him gently by the arm.

"Come with me, sir, and we will have a quiet talk," he said, persuasively.

Blake meditated for a moment.

"Very well; I will do so," he replied. "I need rest, and I dare say I shall find work even where I go. Even you, I venture to assert, are going along the downward road, a victim to your sins."

"We are none of us perfect," good-naturedly replied Sterling, "and I don't claim to be. But we will speak of that later. Let us go!"

And they started down the street. Sterling had no more definite purpose in view than he would have had if he had rescued a cat from vandal boys, but he deemed any person mentally afflicted as worthy of forbearance and all possible kindness.

CHAPTER III.

THE MONEY-LENDER'S HOUSEHOLD.

WHEN Sterling and Blake started off together the crowd remained behind. They had had their sport with "Deacon Broadcloth" and were willing to be rid of him, while if Al Sterling cared to shoulder the crank, they had no objections.

But one thing occurred to them and occasioned remark; Sterling was the clerk of Father Lockyard, the money-lender, who was also the father of Zora, and it might prove he was taking a firebrand into the house.

Over Lockyard's office-door was a sign bearing his name, but Blake did not seem to take any notice of it. They entered.

Father Lockyard sat at his desk, a mild-faced old man with gray hair and a patriarchal beard. He was a money-lender, but he was no usurer. Indeed, at the rate he loaned, it was a wonder that he made a living, and some people suspected it was merely an excuse to give him employment to occupy his time.

Yet, it remained a fact that both himself and his clerk were idle half of the time.

"Good-afternoon, gentlemen," said Father Lockyard, arising, and bowing politely to the stranger. "I was nearly on the point of falling asleep and am glad to see any one on business."

"I have business with you," Bartholomew Blake abruptly answered. "I have come to save you from your sins; to turn your wayward feet from the paths of wickedness. You drink, gamble, lie and steal and your only hope is to turn quickly. Reform, while you can!"

The money-lender stood dumfounded. An amiable, kind-hearted man, with a rare reputation for honor, he was amazed to bear such terrible crimes laid at his door. The look on his face was laughable, but as he turned his eyes as a last resort toward Sterling, the latter made a significant sign by tapping his forehead and Father Lockyard's face cleared.

He spoke to the reformer in tones which plainly had an effect, for the latter suddenly changed his tune and, taking Lockyard's hand, said he was glad there was one honorable man in Big Nugget Bend.

It was arranged to give the stranger a good supper before he left. Lockyard had spoken, though in a feeble way, of sheltering him over night, but Blake declared he could not think of it. He had a mission to perform and must work without ceasing, else his life would not be long enough to reform the whole West.

And there was no doubt but he spoke the truth.

Supper was already on the table, and the three went in and partook together. And it was noticeable that the reformer had a good appetite.

They were just finishing, when there was a quick step at the door and a fourth person entered.

"I'm late, sin't I, father?" cried a girlish voice. "I'm sorry, but I couldn't help it. You see, his fever was worse than ever, and—"

The voice became silent suddenly. In the partially-darkened room the speaker had failed to see the stranger, but at the sound of the voice, Bartholomew Blake had slowly turned until he faced her.

"Oh!" she said, in unbounded surprise.

The speaker was Zora Lockyard.

A short pause followed, but the reformer's stern face did not change. Genuine, indeed, must be his creed, since he could look with indifference on so charming a girl.

"Young woman," he severely said, "I am sorry to see you again."

"Well, all you've got to do is to shut your eyes," the girl retorted. "If you do that, you can't see, and if you shut your mouth close you can't speak."

"Zora!" said Mr. Lockyard, with grave reproof.

"Let the misguided young woman talk. It is well we should know what is in her heart; that we should know for a fact that she is on the downward road. I expect no more than this after what I've seen."

"He saw the liquor I bought for you, father,"

said Zora, laughing lightly. "I dare say he thinks I have drank it all before now."

"Then he is quite wrong," said Mr. Lockyard with mild wrath. My daughter, sir, is not that kind of a person, and I should not touch the stuff were it not for my infirmities."

"Her dress is very gaudy and vain," said Blake with evident dissatisfaction.

"Is it possible?" said Zora in her former vein. "Well, sir, it is paid for, and no loss to your pocket; so set your heart at rest."

"I detest worldly vanity in woman," the deacon relentlessly said.

"I haven't heard any one ask for your admiration," she retorted, with a brightness common to her, and which robbed what she said of half its sharpness.

"Come, come!" interrupted Lockyard, "this is a waste of breath. Say no more, Zora. My daughter is very well, Mr. Blake, and the outer form had better be clad with vanity than the heart with deceit and ungenerous thoughts. Let us say no more. Will you go to my office, sir?"

Blake condescended to say he would, and he followed without another word to Zora, but as he went out he looked at her bright-hued dress and shook his head dismally.

"What a bear!" she exclaimed. "One would think I had a load of silk and diamonds, instead of a cheap plaid dress. Do I look particularly offensive, Al?"

"I will be as frank in my way as Bartholomew Blake was in his," said Sterling, smiling, "and say you look like an angel."

"Horrible! If you were not so devoted to the handsome schoolma'am I should say you were making love to me. But it wouldn't be any use; after seeing what a—foolish fellow you make of yourself over Miss Althea Lawrence I don't want you for a cavalier."

Sterling laughed lightly. He and his employer's daughter knew each other of old, and she exercised her right to say about what she saw fit. And her breezy ways pleased him, for though he cared for her only as a friend she was always loyal in that respect.

"Miss Lawrence may be of your mind," he said, more gravely, after a pause. "She don't seem to appreciate your interest in her. She keeps her distance like a queen."

"I'm afraid she is proud, but if ten million people had not said it before, and worn the quotation threadbare, I would remind you that 'Faint heart never won air lady'."

"Bold hearts avail little with her; she might walk on a pavement made of them and never know they were there."

"Don't you believe she is as blind as she seems. It is my private opinion women are sharper-sighted than men. Further than this, I believe Miss Althea, coming from the East, is just a trifle proud and inclined to look down on us. It is your place to undeceive her. Perhaps I'll help you in your wooing, somehow, but I won't promise."

In the mean while, Lockyard and Blake had gone to the outer room. The former threw open the door and sat down at his desk, after which he opened a conversation with the reformer.

His mild way had a visible effect and Blake, though he did not change the burden of his remarks, was less severe than before. Lockyard asked for his history and received it, if, indeed, the man's mental condition was such that he told a straight story.

He said he was a native of Indiana, but, having traveled extensively, he had seen so much sin that he had resolved to go about and try to arrest his fellow-men on their downward path. He did not assume to be a clergyman, and followed no creed, but simply aimed to make his fellow-beings abandon such sins as drinking, gambling, stealing and the like.

All this he told quite coherently, though always with a strained, fervid, puritanical style which betrayed a mind diseased.

They were still talking when a powerfully built man entered the room and, after a glance at each of the others, nodded to Lockyard. His manner bespoke business, but the money-lender did not show professional zeal—for Big Nugget Bend was not a bonanza town—but he did not like the new-comer's appearance.

He was a typical gold-region rough. Dressed like a miner, he was rude, unshaven and lawless of aspect, and Lockyard mentally compared him to a road-agent.

"How d' do," he said, with a nod. "I see'd your sign out an' dropped in. My name is Jack Bunker."

"A new-comer in town, I take it?" Lockyard observed.

"Wal, sorter. I've b'en in Durango fur ther last two year. A right pert place is Durango, judge."

"Yes."

"But now I'm hyar an' I've had bad luck on ther way. Got cleaned out o' ev'ry dollar by road-agents, an' land dead bu'st whar I expect-ter go inter business."

"That's bad."

"Durned bad" Bunker admitted, his eyes wandering around the room as though taking an inventory of all. "Now, o' course, I go ter work in ther mines instead o' strikin' out fur myself. Bad, that?"

"Certainly."

"What I dropped in fur, though," and Bunker looked over the counter as though he expected to see a safe full of money, "was ter get an advance. 'Bout twenty-five dollars would help me along amazin' until I get ter work. So I've come in ter pay what percent, you ask until I kin hand back ther collateral."

"I am sorry, Mr. Bunker, but I cannot accommodate you," the money-lender quietly said.

"You can't? Why not?"

And Bunker seemed very much surprised.

Lockyard pointed to a sign behind the counter which plainly read:

"We make it a rule to give no reasons when declining to make a loan."

"But I will say to you, Mr. Bunker, that in any of the mines here you may obtain work at once. The pay will be small, for Big Nugget Bend is not a very prosperous place, but work you can get and at once."

"That ain't ther p'int," Bunker surlily said. "I didn't come hyar fur advice, but fur money. An' you won't lend me nothin'."

"I am obliged to decline," Lockyard quietly replied.

Just then Bartholomew Blake arose and came forward.

"Money," he said, in his peculiarly severe way, "is the root of all evil. Here is a poor man in need of help. Why do you turn a deaf ear to him! It is more to your credit to relieve his wants."

Both his hearers seemed surprised, but Bunker was the first to recover his self-possession.

"Now you're a-shoutin', gov'nor," he said, cordially. "I see you hev a heart in your body. Shake!"

He put out a dirty hand which Blake unhesitatingly took.

"Friend," he said, "I trust you have cast off the grappling-irons of the Evil One and anchored in the harbor of perfection."

Bunker looked bewildered, but he managed to say he "reckoned he had."

"Can you conscientiously say you have abandoned vice and are treading the path of the perfect?"

A sudden grin came to Bunker's face. He had heard of the crank who had come to the Bend, and for the first time he recognized him.

"You kin gamble I am on ther right platform," he said, "an' ez one o' ther cosset lambs I hope you'll back me up in this ranch fur a raffle o' a cool twenty-five."

"He will do nothing of the kind," Lockyard declared. "I am proprietor of this place, and when I say no money goes out, it remains."

He spoke the more sharply because he feared Blake was about to fall into evil hands, but the reformer suddenly turned away.

"I detect liquor on your breath," he severely said. "By this I see you are on the downward road, and I wash my hands of the whole affair."

"Just as you say, Deacon Broadcloth, an' jest as you say, Father Lockyard. I'm no beggar an' I won't urge ye, but I'll sorter remember it, you see; sorter—remember."

He spoke with a pause between the words, and with an ugly scowl, but he accepted the verdict as final. He took in the minutiae of the room again, with a sweeping glance, and then slouched out of the door.

The money-lender looked after him thoughtfully. The visit had produced an unpleasant impression, much as though he knew Bunker to be a professional thief, and he thought that he would see to the fastening of the door himself, after that, at least while Mr. Bunker remained in town.

Blake did not prolong his visit greatly after that, but, saying he was going to a hotel, left the place. And as Lockyard did not keep an asylum, he had to let him go.

CHAPTER IV.

A HUNDRED THOUSAND DOLLARS.

JACK BUNKER did not lose much time by the way, but went straight to Parrott's Eureka Hotel. Parrott was said to be a veteran soldier, who had served his country better than his country had served him. He had lost a leg and an arm in battle, but for some reason he had never received a pension.

He ascribed this to the "penurious perfidy" of the Government, but, when one remembered how many men were paid for injuries never received, it was hard to comprehend why Parrott was shut out.

But it is not of the veteran we now have to speak.

Bunker went straight to Room 33 and knocked in a peculiar way. Other applications might have failed, but this one did not; the door was promptly opened.

Bunker entered.

Two men were in the room; one, a dissipated-looking young fellow, who presented no other characteristic; the other, a man in sober black, who might have been a reformed blackleg. His dress was highly respectable, and so was the black hair combed around to the front of his ears, but he could not hide a rakish air which set on him as a birthright or something else.

Bunker nodded and then walked to a seat.

"Well?" questioned the dissipated young man eagerly.

"I see no reason fur callin' it wal," Bunker surlily answered. "Tell you what, Kellogg, your uncle is a cut-throat o' ther money bags."

"I've seen that myself," the young man replied. "Curse him, he wouldn't give me a thousand if he knew I would make it ten. Well, you saw him?"

"Sart'in' I saw him, an' he declined ter make a loan. He didn't like ter trust Jack Bunker. Ha! ha!"

"We foresaw this."

"Sart'in'."

"Well, proceed."

"I took an inventory o' ther ranch an' see'd that it was no use ter crack ther crib. He clearly keeps little or nothin' in ther office. Ther rest he must store in his private rooms."

"Just as I expected," said Kellogg.

"I hev looked with a professional eye, an' I say thar is nothin' in it."

"Then the other way must be tried. Colonel Warfield, you are in the game."

He spoke to the man in black, who bowed in a highly respectable manner.

"I am not sorry to do my share. Mr. Nathan Lockyard is a rich man. He sees fit to cover this fact, and to live in a little border town and carry on a humble business as though he depended on it for a living. Few people suspect he has a hundred thousand dollars to his name. The fact that he keeps it dark proves him a sort of miser. Good!—misers like to increase their store. Mark the result! I, Gideon Warfield, am the agent of the Quickstep Gold Mine, situated at Cutaway City. Where is Cutaway city? The Lord only knows, gentlemen—I don't. Yet, I am its agent. I wish to sell stock. Those who buy will become millionaires! I think Father Lockyard a good man for a stockholder. If I can sell to him, he becomes a millionaire off-hand, and we—secure his ducats. Kellogg, I will trouble you for a drink of whisky!"

The man in black delivered this address in an eminently respectable manner. No cant, no hypocrisy about him; only sterling honesty and a praiseworthy regard for the decorum of every-day life.

Oddly enough, however, both his hearers laughed aloud.

"You shall have the corn-juice," Kellogg said. "Such talent as yours can't be run on water."

And he produced the essentials for a due devotion to the drink that cheers and inebriates. All, however, imbibed moderately.

"I am sure you will win the case, Warfield," said Kellogg, as he put the bottle away. "You have an irresistible way about you, and my uncle is penurious to a remarkable degree. When you tell him the Quickstep Mine has money in it, he will bite like a fish."

"We hope so," replied Warfield.

"I deem it hard that I am left adrift," grumbled Kellogg. "My mother was Nathan Lockyard's sister, but to-day he rolls in wealth and I am a beggar. It is not right."

"He must give some reason," suggested Warfield.

"He says I am dissipated and keep evil company," said Kellogg, flushing a little. "I am sure I am no worse than the average, and I claim to have a heart, gentlemen."

"I've see'd proof o' that," laughed Jack Bunker.

"Worthy Jack, I am pleased—"

"You are pleased with Althea Lawrence's pretty face," laughed Jack. "Durnation odd what a muss those female women will kick up in a man's mind, ain't it? Now, ther school-ma'am bez hit you hard, Kell."

"I admit it, you being such a good friend, Jack," said the younger man, with his usual weakness of spirit. "But the long of it is, I haven't pleased her for a cent. She will scarcely look at me."

"Why don't ye 'tend her school?"

"I?"

"Sart'in'."

"Why, I've got a very fair education, now."

"What o' that? S'pose she'll car? Ain't she hyar ter make money? She is, but she finds so few youngsters ter teach that several ole coves, men ez old ez me, are her pupils. O' course ther reason is that they are struck on her charms. What does she keer? Ez I said, she's arter ther almighty dollar, an' she is willin' ter humor these ole idiots ter get it. Ketch on? So, what's ter hender you from bein' a pupil?"

"By George! I'll do it this very day!" Kellogg declared. "You're a trump at planning, Jack. You see, I don't forget it is your plan that is to make my uncle hand over his cash."

"I hev a sort o' talent that way," modestly admitted Bunker, "an' ez I have taken an int'rest in you I'll whoop her up fur your benefit. See?"

Kellogg thought he did see and shook hands all around. The natures of the men were easily seen. Kellogg was a weak, vain, conceited fellow, easily led by the nose; Jack Bunker was a deep, though uneducated, man of the world ready to do the leading; and Warfield was a

shrewd, silent, crafty fellow, zealous in his devotion to his own interests, but shrewd enough to work and give no sign.

Kellogg was, indeed, Father Lockyard's nephew, the son of the old man's only sister; and as such he would have received earnest help from his uncle had he been worthy of it. Lockyard was no miser. He was generous enough where generosity was deserved; he kept a well-supplied house and refused Zora nothing; and he employed Allen Sterling as a clerk when there was really no need of him.

But, after trying Kellogg again and again, and finding him wedded to ways that were evil, he had declined to help him further.

Thus it was that the young fellow was planning to get money by a trick, led on by Bunker, who had gauged his weak mind and was using him as he saw fit.

The three remained in conversation for some time longer, and then Bunker took his departure. He had given a secret sign to Warfield, and thus it was that the two met, half an hour later, where they would not be seen by Kellogg.

"Well?" questioned Warfield, as, smoking a fragrant cigar, he joined his rough companion.

"I want a word in yer ear," Jack said. "Do you really believe this hyar game will work?"

"I've had a good deal of experience," said Warfield, neatly decapitating his cigar with his little finger, "and unless this Lockyard is uncommonly cautious I have no fear that he will escape us. He will buy stock in the Quickstep and Kellogg will get the money he desires."

He looked steadily, though with no trace of keenness, at Bunker as he spoke.

The latter studied Mr. Warfield's watch-chain for a moment.

"Pard," he then said, "I don't s'pose you object ter doublin' ther figgers promised you?"

"Certainly not."

"Then, I'll say 'twixt you'n me that I am playin' a double game. What's Kellogg ter me? Bah! he is not more nor a empty-headed fool. All I keer fur him is ter make him useful. Therfore, my object is ter use him an' then scoop in ther dollars myself. I want ole Lockyard's gold."

"A praiseworthy ambition," said Warfield.

"Kellogg is my cat's-paw; you're my lever ter move ther rock away. What d'ye say, shall we fine hands an' try ter clean out ther ole man for our mutual gain?"

Straight in his companion's face Jack Bunker looked, but Warfield was studying his cigar tip, as he held it in his hand, as though it was an oracle.

"This is a new turn of affairs," he said, slowly.

"But it doubles your figures, an' you must bear in mind 'twas me that brought you ter Big Nugget Bend. Kellogg didn't know ye, an' you owe yer position ter me. Ez a result, you'n me should pull tergether."

"There is reason in that," Warfield admitted, "and as I believe in standing by my friends, I am with you."

The compact was cemented by a clasping of their hands, and then, as it was not wise for them to be seen too much together, they separated and went their different ways.

Jack Bunker smiled grimly.

"So-ho!" he muttered, "I opine I have ther game well under way. Kellogg will help me ter fleece Lockyard, Warfield will help me ter fleece Kellogg, an' I'll help myself ter fleece Warfield. Fur have ther lion's share I will, ez is my right. I hev not come three thousand miles ter empty Nathan Lockyard's pocket ter lose my grip now. I'll make these fellers useful ter me, an' then, hol fur a clean sweep of all. You've played a good game afore, Jack Bunker, an' you'll be a fool ef you lose this one."

And Bunker went to a low saloon to drink to his own success and pass a few hours which might otherwise have hung heavily on his hands.

The late interviews had shown that Father Lockyard's presentiments of evil were not unfounded, but he had no suspicion of the extensive plot to rob him of his honest possessions.

CHAPTER V.

MISS LAWRENCE HAS VISITORS.

BIG NUGGET BEND was neither a large nor a prosperous place, but it had a school-house—a rude, strictly practical affair, but a school house for all of that. It was built under circumstances we may briefly describe.

No one had thought such a thing necessary until, one day, a young lady arrived in town and losing no time, went around among the men, prominent and insignificant, and broached the subject. She said the Bend ought to have a school, and that if the Bend would furnish the building she would furnish the teaching.

Now, there were four children in town, and they certainly needed teaching, but it was not clear how they could support a teacher who dressed in such style as Miss Althea Lawrence—such was her name.

Objections she met, of this and other kinds, but there was considerable encouragement, too. If the lady had been plain-looking the scheme

would never have worked; but where was a community of men ever found who could look with indifference on female beauty?

Miss Lawrence was beautiful, and Big Nugget Bend decided that she must be kept to give the place character and respectability, if for no other reason.

So the school-house went up in mushroom style, and almost every citizen claimed the honor of driving a nail, while more than one gray-haired m'ner decided that he ought to "brush up" his book-learning.

The school became a thing of fact and Miss Lawrence had pupils aged from six to sixty. It was not a systematic affair, and many of the mature pupils made short hours in school and talked of the weather in preference to school books.

For the truth may be told in a word: the Bend was proud of Miss Lawrence; it admired her intensely; and she became as much a part of their lives as the food they ate. All were her admirers, if not her lovers, but though she was kind and gracious to all, she kept them at a certain distance with her sweet dignity and made the chain all the stronger.

Toward some of the rough characters she had to be severely reserved; and toward one worthy man she was decidedly cold.

We refer to Allen Sterling, of whom we have spoken before, but whose case we will touch here but to leave until a later hour.

The morning after the scenes we have last described, Miss Lawrence was early at the school-house, but she found one person ahead of her. A weak-faced, dissipated young man was seated on the step; a man a stranger to her, but better known to us as Horace Kellogg.

He removed his hat and bowed politely, rather too much so for the occasion, and then followed her into the school-room.

"I hope you'll excuse me, Miss Lawrence," he said, "but I want to join your school, and, being a stranger here, have no one to introduce me."

She looked at him quietly, while he felt his admiration for her beauty increase.

"I have about all the pupils I can attend to now," she slowly replied.

"But I hope there is one vacancy. I will endeavor to be of as little trouble as possible, and my education needs brushing up sadly. In this wild country a man loses ground rapidly."

"Yet, I shall be obliged to decline your patronage."

"You will?" he said, in surprise.

"Yes."

"And why so?"

"Because I believe you to be as well educated as myself. My position here is not an empty one, nor am I so greedy for money as to take for pupils all who come along. It is clear that your education is all right, and I shall not be able to help you."

She spoke with perfect politeness, but Kellogg was wise enough to see she did not care for his friendship, and a slight flush appeared on his cheeks.

"It strikes me you carry a high hand here," he could not help growling.

"People usually make their business a matter of personal convenience and benefit," she replied. "I have to consider every point as much as the merchants of our town."

"Their creed is to take all they can get; yours seems to be to decline good offers. I am well able to pay."

The last remark was injected with a spiteful inflection, but it did not move her from her calmness. She remarked that she had not thought of doubting that, and then the interview was cut short as her most youthful pupils came in with a rush, and proceeded to deluge their teacher with kisses.

Kellogg lacked the wit to take his failure with outward composure, and as he could not talk in the presence of the children, he wheeled abruptly and walked out of the school-house. Not once did he look behind him, but with his jaws set and desperate thoughts in his mind, went to seek for Bunker. That worthy had started him on his unsuccessful venture, and might now be able to give him further advice.

Miss Lawrence, however, watched him as he moved away, and, so deeply did she fall into thought, her pupils pulled in vain at her dress for some time. Her thoughtful face betrayed that she was engaged with some intricate problem, though she did not betray the fact.

"Where have I seen him before?—or have I never seen him? There is something familiar about his face, especially his eyes, but I cannot place him. Yet I feel sure he has some time crossed my path, and that, too, as an enemy. Why can't I remember?"

She put her hand to her forehead and frowned in a vexed way.

"If he is not my enemy I feel sure he will be. His presence brought a chill to me which is new, but which must certainly be more than an idle fancy. I shiver even now!"

And she did shiver in earnest, but the pulling of the children at her dress suddenly increased and the smallest of the party added the information that a strange man was coming, and that she was "scared."

Miss Lawrence turned. At the door stood a man strange indeed to the little school-house, but no stranger to the reader.

It was Bartholomew Blake.

Standing there with his severe face and ministerial cut of garments, he looked not unlike the statue of an avenging being of some sort, and it was no wonder Betty Pollack was frightened.

"Are you the young woman who has charge of this place?" demanded Bartholomew, in his incisive way.

"I am, sir," replied Miss Lawrence, slowly.

Perhaps she wondered if Big Nugget Bend was about to have a preacher as severe as the old Puritans.

"Let me ask if you comprehend the responsibility resting upon you as a director of youthful minds? Are you guiding them aright? Do you practice what you teach? Is your own record clear or are you on the downward road?"

His words were flung forth in his most relentless manner. Had he been a judge pronouncing the sentence of death on a criminal, he could not have been harsher.

Miss Lawrence looked bewildered. If she had thought her visitor a preacher of the Gospel before, she wavered in the belief. Severe as some of the class are, no one in his right mind would begin so uncalled-for an attack or speak so wildly.

"Really, sir," she replied, recovering her self-possession in a moment, "I must ask your authority for such questions. I do not recognize you as a resident of Big Nugget Bend, so you cannot be personally interested in the children—"

"I am interested in all of this erring race. My name is Bartholomew Blake and I am a reformer of my fellow-creatures. I trust I may be able to reform you, for it is evident you need it sadly. Pause, young woman, before it is too late!"

The reformer had removed his Quaker-like hat, and, standing there with one hand outstretched at full length, with the wind bearing his waveless hair further back from his broad, high forehead, he recalled the history of many an old, stern, harsh and intolerant man who put the kindly and natural impulses of the heart aside for a fancied sense of duty.

Miss Lawrence seemed chilled afresh, but not so Betty Pollack. With the wisdom and spirit of her seven years strong within her, she went three steps toward Bartholomew Blake and shook her tiny fist belligerently.

"Don't you scold my teacher!" she cried.

"She's as good as an angel and you're a wicked man. I s'pect you're a road agent, I do!"

And Betty stamped her foot—once, only, for Althea caught her in her arms.

"Hush! hush! Be quiet, Betty! The gentleman means well."

"Means well?" echoed Blake. "You speak as though I am practically wrong. So, doubtless, I am, in your estimation. To the worldly, all are wrong who seek to act as reformers."

Althea's spirit arose. It was not altogether pleasant to be thus taken to task by a stranger, while the sight of her little friends—all except Betty were very much frightened—in such distress was more than she would bear.

"All this is very well in its place," she said, "but it is not in place here. I am here with my pupils and it is the hour for us to begin. With due respect for you I must ask you to leave us to our duties."

"An invitation which I cordially second," said a voice at the door, and Allen Sterling entered. "Having seen me before you know I mean you well, Mr. Blake, but it is really not right for you to frighten this lady or her pupils."

Deacon Stonefist turned his eyes upon him and looked for a brief moment in silence.

"You are all alike, all chained down by your vices," he then said, in the old way. "One would think I was here as a bandit instead of as a reformer. Still, as I have eaten your bread I shall make no words with you. It shall be as you say; I will go. But as for this young woman, I shall take early opportunity to show her the injustice she is doing herself by indulging in her feminine vices—pride, vanity, worldliness and want of good breeding!"

At the last word the reformer turned and without a word of adieu, strode from the room. And Allen, looking out, saw him move down the street with his long hair floating behind him in the wind.

CHAPTER VI.

ONE WOMAN'S WAY.

STERLING did not spend much time in watching the self-styled reformer, but turned to Althea.

"I hope you will pardon me for intruding during school-hours. Miss Lawrence," he said, with the grave politeness with which alone he dared address her, "but I saw that Blake was acting wildly and feared you might be alarmed. I will go now—"

"I beg that you will not until you have ex-

plained something about this singular man," said the teacher, speaking politely, but never getting beyond her old habit of coldness.

Then she turned to her pupils, placed their books right end up, and got them down to business as soon as possible. This done, she came back to Sterling, who had waited obediently.

That was nothing, however; he would have waited all day if she had but said so. For he was in love with this queenly young woman, and was not ashamed that she should know it. That she knew it already he strongly suspected, though, as long as she maintained her past bearing toward him, he would as soon have confessed the fact to a statue of Medea. Not that Miss Lawrence seemed meditating murder, but, toward him, she was as cold as marble.

He now awaited her pleasure with the humbleness of an unencouraged lover.

"I have seen a good many strange characters since I came to Colorado," Miss Lawrence finally observed, "but never one just like the man you found here. Allow me to ask who and what he is?"

"I hardly feel capable of telling you, since he is not a product of the West. He comes from the East—that is, if his account of himself is correct. There is room to doubt it, for he is deranged mentally; to use the current term of the day, he is a 'crank.' He is named Bartholomew Blake, and calls himself a 'reformer.' His talk here was a fair sample of all, so I need explain no further. Since he came here people have given him the expressive name of Deacon Stonefist."

Allen added an explanation of the way in which the name was started, finding Althea an interested listener.

"Rather a dangerous man to have at large, I should say," she then observed.

"Possibly he is, but he comes of that class of human beings we know not how to manage. They are equally perplexed in the East. Now, Deacon Stonefist does not seem crazy enough to shut up, and that, at the best, would be an expense, so we let him go."

"Probably to end by doing some deed of violence."

"There is a danger of that," Sterling acknowledged.

"I think he should be confined somewhere."

"I don't know where Big Nugget Bend would put him. We lack an asylum."

"Probably you are right," she answered, after a pause. "But, if he is always in such a mood I hope his task of 'reforming' the place will soon be accomplished, so he can move on. I don't care to have such a visitor."

"Rest assured he will not be allowed to annoy you," said Sterling, quickly. "Even now, if you wish, I will report the case to the sheriff."

"I do not wish it," was the quick reply. "If such a thing becomes necessary I will report the matter myself; I do not care to have a gentleman assume that mission for me."

Her manner, as well as her words, conveyed a reproof, though why it should be so was not clear.

Sterling, however, felt it with all a lover's sensitiveness, and leaped to the conclusion he had committed some grave error.

"Believe me," he said, "I intended no harm. I intended to attend to the matter in a—purely matter-of-fact way."

He now became obscure, in turn, and was conscious of not conveying the idea he intended.

"In what other way should you act?" asked Miss Lawrence, raising her eyebrows. "I do not believe in the gallantry of young men, and you are aware that our acquaintance is but a passing one."

"I am sorry to say I realize it," he said, with the courage of desperation.

Miss Lawrence frowned.

"You persist in erring. The other men of the Bend are not like you. You should remember I am a friendless woman in a strange and none too refined place."

Due obedience, indulgence and respect Allen Sterling was more than ready to render a woman, but though he cared ten times more than he did for Althea, he would not listen coweringly to such an undeserved reproof.

"You are inconsistent, Miss Lawrence. 'The other men of the Bend,' as you call them, are not sticks nor stones; they are noisy and turbulent, as is natural to their big hearts. When you appear on the street, they cheer you; when you meet, they compliment you. You hear them without reproof. Now, I, whom fate has seen fit to rear among associations something like your own former ones, must not so much as offer you aid in danger. I am presumptuous—insolent! Very well, so be it. I accept the verdict, and—"

A desperate assertion trembled on his lips; an assertion to treat her from that hour as a perfect stranger; but even in the moment of its struggling for breath it was luckily stopped.

Through the door came still another man, and both Althea and Sterling recognized Daddy Clover, as ragged and dirt-covered as usual; as drunk as usual. He was seldom sober, but ever since Deacon Stonefist turned the faucet at Jonathan's saloon, and Daddy got his mouth

under it, he had been the drunkest and the happiest man in Big Nugget Bend.

Standing by the door and holding to it, he reeled in a pendulum-like way and blinked solemnly at Althea.

"How—how?" he questioned, genially. "How does ther lamp o' genius quiver in the halls o' learnin' this a. m.?"

"All is well," Miss Lawrence answered, with a gentleness in marked contrast with her manner toward Sterling.

"Carry ther news to Hannah," said Daddy, tipping backward, but catching himself on the door.

"Quite right," said Althea.

The old man looked from her to Sterling, who still lingered, and then back again.

"I've come ter be a pupil," he then announced.

"A pupil?"

"Yess'a'm. Ther lamp o' genius is flickerin' feebly with me. Although a gradderate o' college, I find my l'arnin' is slippin' away in ther busy haunts o' life. I'm losin' my grip, as 'twere. Now, *E pluribus dixit ipse*. The exact meanin' o' that is gettin' away from me. Ther crush o' active business drives my 'complishments away. See?"

"That is very clear."

"Yess'a'm. Well, ther lamp o' genius must be fed, yer know, so I've come hyar ter get full—I mean, ter take lessons."

Daddy held tightly to the door with one hand and waved the fingers of the other as though they were bird's claws.

"I don't think you need teaching," said Althea, calmly. "Your education is certainly sufficient for your business. You get along very well, Mr. Clover; of the two, I think you are more fit to be a teacher than a pupil."

"Egad!—never thought o' that," said Daddy, with his mind in deep thought; then, brightening up, he added: "By St. Jago, your idee is good. Natur' did fit me fur a teacher, I b'lieve, an' ther gift mustn't be neglected. See hyar, Miss Lawrence, you an' me will go inter bankruptcy—I mean partnership—together. You shall be ther lady superior an' I'll be ther superior lady—man, I mean. Ther young idee shall be taught, ther lamp o' genius trimmed. Hyar, Hop o' my-thumb, give me yer book!"

He had lurched across the floor and caught Betty Pollack's book from her hand, but when he tried to hold it up with a dignified air, it was noticeable that each letter stood on its head.

"Hyar we hev—what do we hev?" he muttered. "These hyar printed critters seem ter be on a t'ar. But they're nimble dancers, ain't they? See them do ther double-somersault act!"

"You go 'way, Daddy Clover!" ordered Betty. "If your head was steady as them letters it would be all right. Teacher, why don't you send him 'way?"

Allen Sterling was grimly enjoying the scene. Althea had spoken graciously to old Clover, but he could see the half-hidden disgust on her face and he knew she wished the drunkard a thousand miles away. It was, however, not in her line of business to eject him; she was too proud to call on Sterling; so she had to bear the infliction and make the best of it.

But Betty's plea aroused her.

"It is time for me to attend to school, now," she said, "and I must ask the visitors to go. Mr. Clover, you can call again."

"Most convenient way I know of is ter stay, now I'm hyar," Daddy replied. "Will be janitor, an' stay hyar over nights. Have things swept up slick as a silk gown ev'ry mornin'."

Sterling had lifted his hat and walked out, and Miss Lawrence no longer tried to keep her patience.

"Mr. Clover," she said, in a business-like way, "I cannot allow you to remain longer. You are delaying the school unwarrantably. Some other time we will talk, but now you must go."

"Have I come to this?" he asked, putting out one wrinkled hand. "Must I, in whom ther lamp o' genius burns so bright, be bounced like a common man? Is my name Dennis?"

"Can't you understand that we must be alone when attending to our duties?" Althea asked, hovering mid-way between indignation and several other emotions called up by the fact that she was unable to get rid of the man if he persisted in staying; and he was such a ragged, dirt-covered, liquor-soaked old fellow that she felt unable to endure him longer.

"You don't ketch on," said he, waving his hand. "I shall be a help, not a hindrance, ter ther lamp o' genius. I'll sot down hyar an'—Hullo!"

Mr. Clover started and nearly fell as Althea deliberately removed the chair he would have taken. Then she pointed to the door.

"Go!" she said, sternly.

"But Dennis won't go," said he, with a good-natured stubbornness. "I'm a-goin' ter stay, an' ef you won't give me a chair, I'll set on ther floor!"

And he laughed with drunken mirth and did as he threatened.

Althea was in despair. Plainly, she could not have the drunkard sitting in the middle of the floor, and she disliked to send for help, as

such a thing would probably reach the ears of Allen Sterling.

Once more she addressed Clover and used all her eloquence, in vain. There he sat, as foolishly and smilingly stubborn as the eternal hills.

"Betty," she finally said, in despair, "I think you will have to go for your father."

Daddy laughed unmusically.

"Do it!" he said. "I left Ben Pollack, an hour ago, ez drunk ez a lord, he was."

"I'm 'fraid that's so," said Betty, gravely.

"Well, there must be some one sober in Big Nugget Bend," said Althea, almost ready to weep from vexation.

Even as she spoke there was a sound of footsteps at the door. She turned. Allen Sterling had re-entered. He did not look at her, but with his eyes fixed on Daddy Clover, strode across the floor.

Althea stood in silence. She dimly comprehended that Sterling, suspecting there would be trouble, had lingered outside the door; but she hardly knew whether to be thankful for such aid or not. It was a virtual defeat for her, for Sterling must have heard all.

But, if so, he gave no sign.

Without a word to Daddy Clover, and heedless alike of his threatening and coaxing, he raised him and started for the door. With his hand on Daddy's collar, never looking at Althea and never speaking, he marched the drunkard out, and Miss Lawrence was free to go on with her school.

CHAPTER VII.

A CHANCE TO GET RICH.

THE household of Nathan Lockyard, the money-lender, was small but happy. Except for the clerk, it was limited to the old gentleman and Zora. True, Lockyard had a nephew in the person of Horace Kellogg, but he was not at all proud of the fact, and never invited him to his house.

Zora was the sunshine of her father's life, and he valued her above all his other worldly possessions. If Nathan became gloomy, as men will at times, she chased the clouds away. Her buoyancy of spirit was unceasing and contagious. Where she was, people laughed but seldom wept.

People there were who did not like the girl, and called her rude and saucy. They would have been better fitted to criticise had they as seldom maliciously wounded those they met as did Zora. Her spirit of fun was sometimes rather too free, but never intentionally harsh. And her heart was kind and loving.

Toward evening of the same day last referred to, Zora was alone in the office when an unexpected caller walked in. He was no stranger. A month before he had come to the Bend, and, hiring a place nearly opposite the money-lender's house, had put out a sign which bore the name of Abram Wisecraft, and was followed by the single word, "Lawyer."

He had not made a good impression at the Bend. He was a man of about sixty years and looked as though, by some patent process, he had been shriveled up so that his weight fell off from a hundred and sixty to forty pounds less. Dried up he certainly was, with a wrinkled face of an odd, leathery color, but the face was a shrewd, sharp one, and very bright eyes gleamed under his shaggy brows.

Big Nugget Bend was not pleased to see him. They had been in the habit of settling all disputes amicably over a bottle of whisky, or more noisily over their six-shooters, but here was a man who wanted charge of their disputes, and would settle them by taking all the portable property at stake.

Such was their opinion of lawyers, in which they did not stand alone; and they gave Mr. Wisecraft a wide berth and an extra name. "Old Ketchum," they called him, but they were firm in their assertions that he couldn't catch them.

This was the man who walked into the office and nodded to Zora.

"Not busy, I see," he then added.

"No," she admitted.

"I hardly see how Mr. Lockyard gets a living at this business."

"There are those that pay less well."

Old Ketchum smiled. While he indulged in this way his lower jaw dropped and a series of wrinkles ran up each side of his face, coming together at the nose, that were like the stripes on the American flag.

"I take the hint, Miss Lockyard," he said, good-humoredly, "and the point is well made. Not a client has been in my office since I came to the Bend. Don't your father intend to sue any one?"

"Not that I know of, but if he does I'll let you know so you can defend the other party."

"Score another point, Miss Lockyard. But don't you know I would prefer to be on your father's side?"

"I suppose any man had rather strike a rich mine than a poor one," Zora replied, wondering what Old Ketchum was driving at.

"In other words, you suppose I would rather be with your father because he is rich and I should stand a better chance of filling my own pocket. Trust a woman to get down to the clear

point, and trust the world to learn that all lawyers are rascals. That is all right, so far as it goes, and I am used to it. But, just now, I have business with your father. Can I see him?"

"Certainly. He is just inside. Give a double knock at the door and you'll hear him bid you enter."

Old Ketchum tried it and found it to be as she said. Then he entered the private room and Zora was alone.

Naturally, she had a good deal of curiosity to know what had brought him there. She might have learned by listening at the door, but as she did not believe in such work she did nothing of the kind.

Some one came in who had been there before and whose case she understood thoroughly. He did not like the terms Lockyard insisted upon and a half hour's talk followed. Her mind had been drawn from Old Ketchum, but his stay was still prolonged.

Finally he came out and, with a simple nod to Zora, left the office and crossed the street to his own. Then she went to her father.

The money-lender sat with his face shaded by his hand, and his attitude was such that she thought he was ill. She asked the question quickly, and then he looked around and laughed.

"Ill! Nonsense, child; I was never in better health."

But if Zora had feared for him before her fear was now redoubled. Her eyes were remarkably keen, and she saw a look on his face which had driven the old, placid expression entirely away.

"What is the trouble, father?" she asked, going to him quickly.

He tried to look very much surprised but made a failure of it.

"What do you mean? There is nothing wrong that I know of; why do you ask?"

"I can see it in your face. Don't you know I have studied it so long that I should be a dull scholar not to read aright now?"

She had taken position on his knee and her arm was around his neck. If she was gay and almost reckless in her manner before the world, she had another side to her nature which showed when she was alone with her gray-haired father.

"I grant that you are observing," he said "but in this case you err. I am quite well and—all's well."

He hesitated a little before uttering the last words, and she knew they cost him an effort.

"Now, father," Zora gravely said, "why will you try to deceive me? Am I unworthy your confidence? You have just had a visitor. What has he said to make the peaceful look on your face give place to one of dread and trouble? Is your business in danger from this shark of the law?"

"Oh! no; my business was never more satisfactory."

"Then what did he say to trouble you?"

She laid her head against his shoulder and her manner was fraught with temptation. Surely such an appeal would have brought forth any ordinary secret. But Nathan Lockyard caressed her hair and seemed uncertain what to say.

"For once you are wrong, Zora," he finally answered. "Of course there are shadows in even our placid lives, but there is nothing serious. And Mr. Wisecraft had nothing to do with my sober expression, if such a one you saw."

Zora did not answer or move at once. Accustomed as she was to her father's ways, and to studying every phase of his character, she knew he had not spoken truthfully. And as she had never before known him to vary from the path of veracity, it was surprising. But she did not blame him; she knew he must have some urgent reason for his course; and if he withheld the truth it was from kindness.

"It shall be as you say," she finally answered, "but if you need help, don't fall into the mistake of thinking me a useless girl. I can climb a cliff or shoot a revolver equal to most men at the Bend, and such an aid is worth having."

She managed to laugh and left his lap just as a rap sounded at the door. She opened it and a very bland-looking man was revealed. He was a stranger to them, but, having already met him, less so to us.

It was the partner of Jack Bunker and young Kellogg.

He bowed politely and addressed Lockyard. "If you are not busy, I would like half an hour of your time," he said, in a very respectable voice, which was in keeping with his very respectable manner.

The money-lender was not busy, and he said so with all the more zeal and assumption of briskness because he hoped to blind Zora's eyes. He should not have indulged in the vain hope at his age; but without further words Zora retreated to the office.

"Now that we're alone I'll come right to business," the visitor said. "My name, sir, is Gideon Warfield, and I am a stockholder in the Quickstep Mining Company, of Cutaway

City, Idaho. You find me some distance from home, but this may be easily explained. I, sir, am a practical miner. I purchased stock in the Quickstep only when I had seen for myself there was money in it, and after purchasing I went further. I have looked the Quickstep over most rigidly, sir, and as a result I am convinced there is a fortune—an immense fortune, sir—in it. Having found this out, I became desirous of getting control of all the stock I could."

Lockyard nodded slowly. He believed he saw what was to be said next.

"To do this I must move secretly, or the stock would be pushed up. I resolved to have a good partner. Thinking I knew just the man I came to the Gunnison valley and went to Ruby to see a friend of mine. When I arrived, lo! the man was dead. It was a bitter disappointment, but I put my wits to work. The result was that I resolved to take no partner, but, in brief, to borrow a few hundred thousand dollars and buy up all the stock on the sly. That's why I have come to you."

"To me? Do you take me for a millionaire?" Father Lockyard questioned.

"By no means; if you were that, you would be the owner of a mine, instead of following your present trade."

Mr. Warfield threw out the hint in as respectable a way as though a hook did not lurk within the bait.

"But if you wish to gather 'a few hundred thousand dollars,' what I could loan you would be a mere nothing."

"Who would loan me the whole in a lump and not feel an ambition to get the lion's share? If I had a partner with a hundred thousand, I would like it; but since I am to borrow, it must be in smaller sums. If I take all the risk I want very nearly all the gain."

This frankness favorably impressed Lockyard and he asked more about Cutaway City and the Quickstep mine. The account he received was to the effect that Mr. Warfield hoped a new Leadville had come to light in the Idaho mountains. And he gave figures calculated to prove that the Quickstep was capable of making a few millionaires.

"It was a severe blow to me to find Jackson dead, for I wanted a partner badly," added Warfield; "a man who could be depended on because he was getting rich at the same time I was."

Mr. Warfield gave a sigh for the lamented Jackson and looked sadly at his polished boots.

"Suppose," said Lockyard, slowly, "that you had another partner?"

"Why, if he was a one-horse man I wouldn't look at him; but an honest, substantial man, one I could safely tie to, as the saying goes, such a man would be a godsend to me."

"Suppose I find such a man?"

"You?" cried Warfield, dropping the late Mr. Jackson and springing into new life. "Well, you're a stranger to me, but men say you are eighteen carat fine, and I feel sure the man you would recommend would be the same. Name the man, sir, and I'll talk seriously with him."

"I must see him first," said the money-lender, slowly. "Perhaps he would not engage in the matter. You are positive the Quickstep is rich and sure?"

"As sure as I am of my own breath; so sure that my last dollar goes into it," said Warfield, as bravely as though the Quickstep was not a phantom of his mind and his 'last dollar' nearly as vague an affair.

"Well, I will see my man," Lockyard said, "and if you care to call again the matter may soon be settled. He does not care so much to increase his wealth as to place it where it will be in a form thieves can't run away with."

"A sensible idea, and I take it I shall like the man. Of course—this is between you and me—I reserve the right to reject the alliance if I don't like him."

"Quite right and sensible."

Little more was said, for the visitor had worked the case to the very point where he desired to leave it, and then he took his departure. He went straight to Parrott's Hotel, and was soon in the presence of Jack Bunker.

"Walf?" questioned the leading plotter, eagerly.

"The hook is in his mouth; it only remains to land him," Warfield replied; and then he gave an account of the whole affair as near as he could remember what had been said.

"It is clear he bites," he added, "and his report that his man wants some safe place to put his money confirms it. His 'man' is himself. Now, unless the plot miscarries, he will take the share in the Quickstep, and we will be so much the richer—I mean, Kellogg will."

He winked at Bunker, and the latter nodded in reply; after which they emptied a half-pint flask together.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE DEACON'S HEAVY HAND.

ZORA was pleased to see that her father brightened after the visit of the last caller, and he became so much like his genial self that she partially forgot her fears, the more so that she

could not see what serious trouble he could have. His fortune was ample, his loans were trivial in character, and no loss of the kind would cause him inconvenience; so she decided that Old Ketchum must have been more disagreeable than dangerous.

The money-lender's daughter was a lover of out-door life. Half her time was spent among the hills that surrounded the Bend, and no one knew so well as she the secrets of the eternal peaks and gulches. She had some accomplishments, too, not common to her sex. She was a fine equestrienne, a good revolver-shot, and no novice at handling an oar—though there was no chance for boating around Big Nugget Bend.

The day following the last-described scenes she went for one of her rambles among the hills. As usual, she was alone.

She went to an elevated place, where Nature had formed a sort of chair from the solid rocks, and sat down to humor her fancy that she was a queen on a throne.

The Bend lay below her. It was a quiet, peaceful scene, with little that was new for her to look at, for the business which gave the town its existence was off at one side where the few mines existed.

Perhaps an hour passed and the girl was fast falling asleep when a footstep caused her to turn quickly.

There was an intruder on her royal premises; near the foot of the throne was a man who had come uninvited and stopped in the same way.

He was no stranger; in his burly form and unshaven face she recognized a man she had before seen in the village and the reader may recognize Jack Bunker.

One moment they looked at each other in silence and then the man removed his hat with awkward politeness.

"Mornin', miss," he said, with a contortion of his face meant for a smile. "Hope I don't intrude. I was jest passin' this way an' run on ter yer by accident."

"Don't apologize; everybody is free to walk here," she calmly replied, not pleased with the man but just as far from being afraid.

"But 'tain't everybody has a bower o' beauty like you. Shoot me ef 'tain't a reg'lar chair an' o' solid rock."

"Yes."

The monosyllable did not hold out encouragement to him to remain longer, but he was not a man to be discouraged.

"Fine view, from hyar."

"Yes."

He looked at her from under his shaggy brows in a searching way. He was not a fool, this unshaven man of the mines, and he knew his company was not desired. This, however, made no difference to him.

"You're the darter o' Lockyard, the money-lender, I b'lieve," he went on evenly.

"Yes."

"Look like him; same eyes an' ginerall make-up o' face. Business pretty brisk, now?"

"Really, I don't know, sir. Perhaps father could tell you; you'll find him in the office, now."

Zora was resolved to get rid of the man. She had no means of knowing he was at the front of a plot to rob her father of a fortune, but she did not like him and would not prolong the interview. Neither was she willing to forsake her throne to get rid of him; he was the one who must go.

He, however, easily comprehending her hint, showed a disposition to carry the war into her camp.

"Don't know that I care ter see ther old man ter-day, though I may call on him later. Ther more I look at you, miss, ther more you look like some one else I knowed onc't. What might 'a' been your mother's name?"

"I beg your pardon, sir, but all such questions are better addressed to my father than to me. Besides, I am here to-day for quiet and don't care to talk."

"Pr'aps you hev a mortgage on these hills," he retorted.

"No, I haven't, and no one has a mortgage on me. When I want company I know how to say so, and when I want to be alone, alone I will be."

Zora having held her peace as long as she could, had at last carried the war into the enemy's camp with vigor.

"Oh! no offense, miss; I didn't mean ez bad ez I said. But it cut me right sharp ter be snubbed so. Tell ye what 'is, thar ain't no time in a man's life when he feels so hurt ez when he begins ter realize he's gettin' old an' that ther gals won't keer fur him."

The absurdity of supposing Bunker on the verge of this chasm, and his attempt to look melancholy did not hide the fact that he was a dangerous man; but Zora laughed in spite of all.

"I never would have taken you for a gellant," she said, "but now I look at you more closely, I have no doubt you have broken many a heart in your time."

"More than you think, my lady," he muttered, a dangerous light in his eyes. "Don't take too much trouble to sneer at me. Ef thar is a blockhead in ther world it's a gal at your

age. All on you think you know ther bull business, but ef ye live ter be thirty, ye'll find you didn't know nothin'."

"In that case I shall be almost as ignorant as you," Zora retorted.

Bunker looked at her for a moment in silence, his lips parted and an evil light in his eyes.

"Don't tempt me too fur," he finally said. "When I tell ye that, I don't mean I would harm yer leetle finger, even, but ef you scoff too much at what ther Lord bez made me, hang me ef I don't hev a kiss from that rosebud mouth o' yourn!"

"Try it, if you dare!" exclaimed the girl, never stirring, but with a red flush on her cheeks and an angry light in her eyes.

The defiance was followed by two things. Bunker leaped forward at the challenge, his arms outstretched, and Zora dropped her hand to the pocket where she expected to find her revolver, and finding it, to keep him at bay.

The result was startling; the revolver was not there!

And in a moment more she was in the arms of the rough.

She uttered a little cry, and struggled as best she could, but her strength was so insignificant compared with his, that she barely evaded his hairy lips for a moment; another brief space of time and she must have succumbed; but just then there was a heavy thud, and Bunker released his hold and rolled from the rock.

Zora was rescued—how?

She looked up quickly. Another man stood beside her; a tall man in a suit of sober black, with a Quaker-like hat, long, straight hair and a smooth-shaven face.

It was Bartholomew Blake!

Easy enough it was then to understand the thud and the cause of Bunker's fall; the "reformer" had again made good his right to be called "Deacon Stonefist," as Bunker had found to his cost.

But the crank of the Bend did not show the least excitement over the occurrence. Looking steadily at the fallen ruffian, his face was as calm and severe as ever.

Bunker arose slowly. He was not injured, but he was a good deal astonished. He looked at the Deacon as though there were a good many points of interest about him and they must be gathered slowly and one at a time.

Of course he recognized him; every person at the Bend had heard of the crank who had set for himself the task of reforming them; and those who had not seen him knew his description well.

Bunker looked at the noted man. He had heard of his powerful blow when the board was split, but had regarded it as an exaggeration. Now, looking at him closely, he forgot that a long, frock coat, tightly buttoned, is a deceptive garment and believed he saw in Deacon Stonefist no other but a slender young man of truly ministerial cut.

And Jack Bunker, smarting from his discomfiture, resolved to have revenge and, at the same time, show Big Nugget Bend that he was a "bigger" man than Blake.

"You infernal sneak!" he exclaimed, shaking his fist at the Deacon, "what d'ye mean by that? D'ye know what you've done? You've awoke a full-grown cyclone an' it is hungry fur ha'r. I'm Jack Bunker, ther raw-horse eater, an' I never give nur take mercy. You've hit me from behind an' only a coward would do it, but I'll knock you blind ter pay fur it!"

And he shook a huge and none too-clean fist.

"Perhaps you will try," said Blake, calmly, "but the end will not be as you or I wish; the affairs of men are but little in their own keeping. I will say, however, that you have done a most vile and ignoble thing, and that I thank fortune I was at hand to chastise you. Not that I uphold this maiden, for she is of a vain, light and giddy nature, but no one should lift his hand against his fellow-creatures without cause. That you have assaulted a woman proves that you are on the downward road."

"He was on the downward road when he fell off the rock," Zora could not help interrupting.

Bunker leaped back to the same level with themselves.

"I'm on ther up grade now," he declared, with an oath, "an' I've got full steam on an' am a-runnin' forty miles an hour. Look out fur me, I'm a-comin', an' I'll knock you clean over ther sun!"

The ruffian made several flourishes with his fists, but he did not yet advance.

"Man," said Blake, severely, "such conduct ill-b-comes one made in the image. You first insult a woman and then seek revenge for your just downfall. Peace!—revenge is not for us frail creatures of earth—"

"You'll find it's for me!" cried Bunker, and at the last word he launched out his fist savagely.

Had it gone on its way unchecked it would have found Blake's head to his sorrow, but we may remark, incidentally, that it somehow deviated from its direct line and brushed harmlessly over the reformer's shoulder.

Another moment and Bunker's hands were both seized and held captive despite his struggles. The Deacon held him as in a vise and

seemed to have a wrist of iron as well as a fist of stone.

"Peace!" he again said. "Your conduct is disgraceful, and it is no wonder Big Nugget Bend is shunned by timid people. Her inhabitants are vile and brutal, and you are one of the worst. You are on the downward road and speeding headlong toward destruction."

CHAPTER IX.

JACK BUNKER SEEKS REVENGE.

NEVER before had Bunker been in the hands of a man who seemed so much like a compact bunch of muscle. Jack was the heavier man of the two and should have been the stronger, but, struggle to the extent of his power as he would he could not break that iron hold.

Zora enjoyed the scene, for though she had taken a dislike to Blake she felt even less kindly toward Bunker, and, undismayed by the fact that two men were fighting, she laughed merrily.

"Now I see just where your best hold is, Deacon," said she; "it lies in your muscle. You may talk reform to Big Nugget Bend till the cows come home and you won't make a convert, but get them in such a grip as that and you'll be sure to make them holler."

"I don't holler fur this white-livered cur!" panted Jack Bunker, madly; "and I'll hev his life ef he don't let go on me. Curse you, drop mv wrists!"

"Peace, profane raller; I but conquer your brute nature, appealing in the meanwhile to your gentler one. Reform—"

He paused suddenly as Bunker made a vicious attempt to kick him in the stomach. It was a failure, owing to a quick movement on the Deacon's part, but a slight flush then arose to the latter's face, his lips became compressed and, quickly raising the ruffian, he cast him from the rock.

He had fallen victim to a righteous wrath.

For the second time he fell to the ground, but the distance was not sufficient to injure him, and he was soon on his feet.

He did not, however, attack again. It was in his heart to shoot down the man who had worsted him, but with Zora for a witness, he dared not do it. Neither did he dare pit his strength against that of Deacon Stonefist; he had seen his prowess, and wanted no further illustration.

In that moment, however, he vowed to have revenge. He looked at Blake, and a smile actually crept over his face.

"You're not at all slow for a parson," he said; "but, though you've used me ha'sb, I'll let it drop. It sha'n't be said I did harm ter a crank. Ez fur you, gal, you hev 'plauded what he's did, an' ef you prefer a looney cuss ter a man like me, so be it. Much joy I wish you with him. So long."

He slouched away, not once looking behind him, and Bartholomew Blake watched until he disappeared. The Deacon was in turn watched by Zora, but his icy face told no tales.

Anon he turned his steel-like eyes toward her.

"I owe you thanks, Mr. Blake," said the girl, "and they are earnestly and sincerely given."

"I am glad you realize that I have helped you," he said, with a wonderful lack of modesty. "You seem at least to realize the trouble from which I have saved you, even though you brought it upon yourself."

Zora flushed.

"I admit the justice of your last assertion," she said, less steadily than usual. "I did anger the man needlessly, but when I did so I thought I had a revolver in my pocket and was foolish enough to expect to enjoy his chagrin, when I unexpectedly presented the weapon to his face."

Blake's face became sterner even than its custom.

"Foolish!" he severely repeated. "Would to Heaven it were no more than folly. Do you really mean that you would have drawn a revolver on a human being?"

"Certainly I would!"

"And it has come to this! The women of the country, who should be gentle and reserved, and keep in the background, as Holy Writ commands, now sneak flippantly of using revolvers, and consider it an honor!"

Harshly sounded the Deacon's voice, and Zora became even more rebellious. She had never heard the doctrine of woman's inferiority advanced, and she was not inclined to acknowledge it when preached by the crank of the Bend.

"It is very clear that you don't know much about life in the West," she retorted. "Let me tell you that it is well for all who come to this town, man and woman, to be able to defend themselves. There are men here who scruple at nothing, and I advise you to adopt the fashion and a revolver at one and the same time."

"Fortune forbid! What! I, Bartholomew Blake, go about armed like a desperado? No, woman, no! Here I have my hands, the gift of Nature, and I ask no more. I seek to turn those desperate men of the Bend from their evil courses, but I shall do it by showing their sins,

not by presenting a revolver like a highway man. Young woman, you shock me!"

Zora was indignant, but, remembering the aid he had given her, she could not say what she wished. She could not, however, prevent a flash of resentment.

"I wish you had staid away!" she exclaimed.

"Why?" he coldly asked.

"Because I hate to owe you gratitude."

"Relieve your mind, misguided girl," the Deacon severely answered. "I do not want such gratitude as yours. I would as soon share in the fruits of a robbery. Give no thought to me, but, rather, go and seek to change your wayward heart."

"What is that to you?" she flashed.

"No more than the future of the unhappy man-I found with you. I would see you both reform, for there seems to be little difference between you."

Zora had borne all she could. She was one who never forgot a kindness, and Blake had saved her from Bunker, but there are wounds of the flesh and wounds of the mind.

Tears of anger glittered in her eyes, and when she spoke her voice was husky.

"Since you have so poor an opinion of me, I had better go away. I hope you will find some one as perfect as yourself, some day, but I'm afraid you'll have to look beyond this world. For defending me I thank you, once more, and now I'll go away before I contaminate you."

She did go, starting before the last word was spoken, and not once looking back. Never before had she been so indignant, and the fact that Blake was acknowledged by all to be mentally deranged could not atone for what he had said.

He looked after her without a change of his harsh face.

"Wretched girl! where will her mad career end? She scorns the advice of those older, wiser and better than herself; she boasts of carrying dangerous weapons and parleys with a man but little above the level of a brute. Such depravity is shocking in one so young, and I cannot hope to save her. Nay, I am hasty; let me not view the case in this light but strive yet again. I would save her from her sins if possible!"

He had watched her until she entered a canyon and passed from his sight, and as he stood on the rock with his long hair blowing in the wind and his statue-like face dark and fixed, he seemed like some uncompromising, puritanical minister of olden days preaching from a throne of nature's manufacture.

At the same time Jack Bunker was closeted with Warfield, to whom he had just given his experience. The latter did not hesitate to laugh heartily at his ally's discomfiture, but Jack did not view matters in the same light.

"I'll hev revenge," he said, with a profane addition. "Ef any man thinks I am a ten-pin to be knocked 'round at his will, they'll find there's a big blunder on ther schedule. When I tackled this crank I found a man with more muscle than I've got, an' I had ter take water, but nothin' shorter a cyclone kin lay me out ter stay."

"You won't be fool enough to use a revolver, will you?"

"Not at ther Bend, fur—"

"You made a confounded blunder, anyway. You have set me on to fleece old Lockyard, and now you molest his daughter. Suppose we are seen together and the news gets to the money-lender—do you suppose he would continue to be blind to the hook under my bait?"

"Go it," replied Bunker, humbly. "I deserve all you say. I did step in ther hole up ter my knees. But I do sw'ar ther gal is ez pretty as a pink!"

"Bah! and you are past forty!"

The contempt in Warfield's voice cut his ally to the quick, but he dared not retort. He aspired to play a game for big stakes and make Warfield his main card, and to do this he must keep in his good graces.

"Let all that pass," he sullenly said; "only put one item in yer pipe an' smoke it. Deacon Stonefist pays fur ther blow he struck me with his life!"

"You have some plan. State it!"

"I hev a plan. This hyar crank ain't a fav'rite at ther Bend. Men o' his cloth don't teke wal nowhar, an' specially in a place whar we are free-an'-asy like we be hyar. He has pitched inter ther gang, red-hot, an' you know ez wal ez I thet ef folks didn't think him a crank he would hev got ther dump afore now."

"That's very true; his mental aberration is all that saves him."

"Don't know what you mean by that thar term, but I've got a rill a makin' fur our crank. Ter-night, ez you know, he delivers an address on what he calls 'Ther Battle-field o' Life.' Wal, I reckon all ther boyees o' my stripe will be thar, fur ther fun on't, but ther high toned bucks will stay away. Now, o' course Stonefist will abuse ther Bend an' tell how wicked she be, an' when he does thet he will 'teck on raw spots. Ther Bend don't like ter be pitched inter in that style, see?"

"Of course."

"Also, bein' ther kind o' man you be, you know ther rank an' file o' men are ez easy moved ez a leaf is whiffled by ther wind. When Deacon Stonefist—I like ther name o' Deacon Broadcloth best, 'cause I don't like ter remember how he hit me—when he gets up ter speak, I say, ther will be ten good men ther what I've talked with an' made ter think it are a shame fur even cranks ter abuse ther Bend. See?"

"I detect violence," said Warfield, slowly. "Voylance it will be, fur ther will be a yell ter run him out o' town, an' in ther row ther blood o' ther Bend will go up an' Judge Lynch will ketch hold o' ther plow. See?"

"Yes. And I see you are an adept at getting your enemies off the track, but I doubt the wisdom of your course. My advice is to let Blake alone. You will but bring yourself into notoriety and it may spoil our plan for Lockyard's gold."

"Don't you think it, old man. I will run this game through an' at the same time keep myself out o' sight. Trust me for that. This Deacon Broadcloth dies an' nobody is the wiser. Wait an' see."

CHAPTER X.

JUDGE LYNCH VS. DEACON STONEFIST.

THE self styled reformer did not remain long on the mountain, but returned to the village. He had just reached its outskirts when a man arose from a rock and confronted him. The first glance showed Blake that he was intoxicated, and there was little chance to hope it was his first deviation from the path of sobriety.

His spotted face, watery eyes and trembling hands alike betrayed the confirmed drunkard, while his rags and dirt betrayed the poverty-stricken and careless drunkard.

It was Daddy Clover.

"Peace to yer worship!" said Daddy, putting up both hands. "Peace, prosperity, good will to men. May yer shadder never grow less!"

"What means all this wild talk?" demanded Blake, his sternest frown called up by the fellow's appearance.

"Fur be it from me ter cavil," said Daddy, humbly. "I am your slave till ther cows come home."

"Wretched man! you are stupefied with liquor!"

"I know it—ha! ha!" said Clover, gleefully, "an' good whisky it was; went right ter ther right place."

"Then it would have gone to perdition, not into your foolish mouth. Miserable wretch, do you comprehend what you have done? Do you know your feet are treading the banks of the eternal and destroying river? The vile fluid which is depriving you of health and mind in this world will ruin you for the next."

"Hurrah! Whoop her up! hit 'im ag'in!" and Clover tried to execute a dance. "Oh! it would be royal fun ter hear ye buzz when you're full wound up, an' that's why I'm here. I move that we jine hands an' I second ther motion. Oh! we'll make the howlin' team in Colorado!"

"What do you mean?" Blake almost angrily demanded. "Do you suppose I would disgrace myself by being known as your associate?"

"Hol' on; hear me through afore you holler. You don't ketch ther idee. I don't want none o' ther profits; nothin' more than ter be kept in food an'—an' whisky."

"Do you suppose—"

"Hol' on, do hol' on, now. Wait. What I want is fur you ter take me right along whar you go ez a terrible example o' what liquor 'll do. You kin make a big stake on me, fer ther ain't another man so broke up ez I am ter be found in Colorado. Jest keep me full ter ther chin with whisky, worshipful sir, an' I should turn thousands from ther downward path an' at ther same time be as happy ez a clam myself. Say, now, will you take me?"

Daddy was wholly in earnest, and at the end he put out his hands to Blake in a pleading way. He believed he saw his way clear to roll in clover the rest of his days, if he could but convince the reformer, and he was trying to put his best foot foremost and make a good impression.

The result, however, was unexpected. Evidently, Blake felt that he had found a customer more than his match, for, without another word, and leaving the drunkard in ignorance of his sins, he turned on his heel and strode toward the village.

Daddy Clover called after him in vain; he kept on as fast as one of his dignity could consistently walk and the elder man was left in uncertainty as to whether he would be accepted as a "terrible example" or not.

That evening Blake went at an early hour to the place—it was a long shanty, the interior of which had not yet been finished—where he was to lecture on "The battle-field of Life."

He had intentionally chosen a romantic title, believing that would touch the miners more than a plain one, but his purpose was to tell them plainly just what sinners they were and what a wicked place was Big Nugget Bend.

Blake was the first, but not by any means the last man on the spot. The miners dropped in,

singly or in pairs, until he was certain of a good house.

But, as Jack Bunker had hoped, no one else came; no women and no merchant or mine-owner. It was to be a rough-and-ready crowd in the fullest sense of the word.

When they began to gather Blake went among them and talked seriously, as a preface to his lecture. He was careful to say he did not meddle with religion, not being a minister; but he did want them to abandon drink, cards, and kindred failings.

All of these first-comers were men selected by Bunker for his tragic contribution to the affair, and they so managed to worry the "reformer" that he took his place on the dry-goods case—it was the same he had used in front of Kipp & Turner's store—he showed his mental aberration more plainly than usual, and was prepared to deal relentlessly with his audience.

And he did deal relentlessly with them.

As he spoke in his usual vein, we need not give his address here; enough that he handled Big Nugget Bend without gloves; that from his accusations a stranger would have thought it the very worst town between the Pacific and the Mississippi river.

Many of his hearers merely smiled at this. Had he been in his right mind and thus abused, they argued, it would be proper to exact an eye for an eye, but it would be foolish to become angry at a "crank," and it was best to look upon him merely as a comedian.

Unluckily for Deacon Broadcloth, Jack Bunker had sown the seeds of trouble skillfully, and the dangerous element began to show after a while.

Bunker's followers—he was not present himself—looked at each other and muttered darkly, as though their passions were being gradually aroused, and matters went from bad to worse, just as Jack had wished.

The storm finally burst.

A stout fellow, who was a typical Western desperado, suddenly arose head and shoulders above his fellows, as he found a block to elevate him.

"Feller-citizens!" he cried, interrupting the speaker, "what sort o' a place is Big Nugget Bend that we stand hyar an' hear her abused? Is she a rendezvous o' cut throats an' blacklegs, an' be we that kind o' critters?"

An angry roar arose from his backers.

"No! no!" they shouted in chorus.

"Do we want he knocked down an' trod on, either?"

"No! no!" replied the chorus, as before.

"Feller-citizens, I accuse this critter o' comin' hyar ter hurt the Bend in int'rest o' Stinger's Bar!"

He pointed to Blake and another roar arose from the chorus. The former, abandoning an attempt to speak for a time, folded his arms and looked at them without a change of countenance. If he was capable, in his mental condition, of realizing his danger, he certainly had good nerves.

The last charge had been a fire-brand; Stinger's Bar was a rival town, and bitter was the enmity between the two. Even some of the honest miners began to change their opinion of the Deacon.

"Boyees," continued the spokesman, "I move that we don't bar it no longer. We hev stood too much a ready. I move we run this critter out o' town!"

The idea pleased those who had already decided upon it and they said as much.

"Down with him!"

"Run him out!"

"No reformer need apply!"

"Ther crank must go!"

With these cries they rushed forward, making for their intended victim on each side, but Deacon Stonefist stood firmly erect, heedless of the mob's angry cries.

Seemingly he was not going to resist, for his arms were still folded, but when the first man laid hands on him he leaped from the case and went at them like a battering-ram.

If any one had doubted the appropriateness of his *sobriquet* of "Deacon Stonefist," they were speedily undeceived. He struck out with both arms, first the right and then the left, and each blow took effect. Back from that attack reeled Jack Bunker's tools, and many a man carried home hurts which would make him wish he had never followed Jack's banner.

But the fight could have but one end, for men are but men at the best, and as the rioters piled on Blake in a body he was finally secured and his hands bound.

Then he stood among them as erect and stern as ever; no signs of fear on his sharply-cut face.

But there were men about him who had broken noses and loose teeth to attend to, and a dangerous sentiment arose against Deacon Stonefist.

Cranks are never safe companions.

"Run him out of town!"

Some one reminded the mob of what they had started to do and the rush began.

Blake was surrounded by those pledged to kill him and marched from the shanty and through the town. Some not in the plot

followed to see how he would take his banishment, but they did not suspect the tragedy in store for them.

The prisoner needed no urging. When once he was overpowered he gave up a useless struggle, but all their jeers failed to make him speak, even as low-muttered threats failed to make him show fear.

Just beyond the northern side of the canon, on the way to Stinger's Bar, was a grove of pines, and toward these the mob went.

They had nearly reached it when there was a sudden stir at the front, and wavering of the line, angry cries and a confused struggle. Just what was wrong those not in the plot did not know, but they supposed the "crank" had made an attempt to escape and were not surprised when the tumult subsided again to hear some one call out:

"It's all right; we've got him again!"

"No; it ain't all right," said another man. "Tom Berry has got a knife slash in his side; ther crank has stabbed him. Bring ther doctor!"

The confusion increased, but those at the rear managed to catch from those in front that Blake had burst his bonds, seized a knife from Berry's belt and stabbed him.

CHAPTER XI.

A DEBT WELL PAID.

ANY one acquainted with the temper of a Western mob can understand how this new revelation fell upon those in charge of Blake. According to all accounts he had stabbed a man without provocation, simply because he was being expelled from the town; and many a man has died in Colorado for a lesser crime when a mob was out.

Jack Bunker's gang were ready for the final act.

"Tom Berry is bleedin' ter death!"

"Serve his murderer ther same way!"

"Hang him!"

"String up ther crank!"

So much fury did they instill into these cries, they had backers even among the honest citizens, but they were not needed; Bunker's brain had cut-and-dried the whole thing.

A rope was produced and Blake was hustled under the tree. The case began to look serious; any one could see it was no joke they intended and, unless something unexpected intervened, Deacon Stonefist must go on his way to another land than Colorado.

But not for a moment did he waver. Some there were who believed they saw a loss of color on his cheeks, but he faced them bravely, his face as stern and grimly righteous as ever, and his eyes looked into their faces unflinchingly.

One end of the rope having been cast over a limb, the other was noosed around his neck, and they were ready to pull him up.

"Now, then," said the self-appointed Judge Lynch, "ef you've got anything ter say yer kin raise yer fog-horn an' toot. We give ye jest one minute!"

"It would please me," said Bartholomew Blake, calmly, "if I had time, to finish the lecture you interrupted. It was a carefully considered discourse, and contained truths you must have felt impressed by. With the limited time allowed me I cannot finish it, however, so I will merely say that it behooves you to employ the brief time at your own disposal to reform. Abandon cards, liquor—"

"Hold on!" said Judge Lynch, sharply. "Never mind us. At this time you should be thinkin' of yourself."

"What of myself?" Blake asked, evidently surprised.

"Why, you're about ter skip over ther divide, an' it looks ter me ez though you would do well ter reform yourself, first of all."

"Oh! I am all right," said the Deacon. "I have lived a perfect life, you see. But you, misguided men—"

"Ten seconds left!" announced Judge Lynch.

"You, misguided men, have great need to reform. Your sins are dark and many. You are slaves to strong drink and cards; you lie, steal—"

"Time's up!"

"And enjoy yourselves in vain and indecorous ways," finished the Deacon, calmly.

"Pull him up!" ordered Judge Lynch.

"Reform!"

The single word, which seemed likely to be Blake's last, pealed from his lips clearly, earnestly, unflinchingly. Surely no man in his right mind, or portion thereof, could thus turn his thoughts from himself at such a moment; he was a crank in the fullest sense of the word.

There was a feeling at the rear of the mob that the matter ought to end there; that it was nothing less than murder to lynch Blake; but those in front did not waver, and they pulled sharply at the rope.

With what result?

Bartholomew Blake remained on the ground, though the rope went up, and beside him stood a slight figure with a knife clasped in one hand.

It was Zora Lockyard.

She had cut the rope near the Deacon's neck, and saved him just as the lynchers pulled away.

And before they had recovered from their astonishment his hands were also freed, and he stood without bonds beside the girl.

Very different, then, was their appearance, for while he was as cool and unmoved as ever, she was flushed, excited, and indignant.

Gradually the lynchers recovered their self-possession, but the silence was not at once broken. Zora was a favorite at the Bend, and no one liked her better than the miners. Her lightness of spirit and bright ways had won their hearts long before; even the men led astray by Bunker's agents were her slaves; and when they saw she was against them in the matter they were staggered.

It was she who first spoke:

"For shame, men!" she cried, in a ringing voice. "I did not think that any one I had called my friend would be guilty of such a deed, but I find you are all alike. Shame on your manhood that you should indulge in such work!"

Only one man found speech with which to reply. He was a bold, unscrupulous fellow named Hexam, and the only one there who knew Jack Bunker's hand had been in the outrage.

"Hold on, Miss Zora," he said, assuming a boldness he did not feel. "You don't understand this case; you don't know what this critter has done."

"What has he done?"

"He's a spy from Stinger's Bar, set ter ruin our camp, an' he's g'in Tom Berry his last hurt."

"It is false, Tim Hexam. Berry was not hurt here; he got his wound last night in a bar-room fight. It's been kept quiet, but I know it. And you know it, too, and you've tried to work it in to go against Blake. There is a plot against him!"

"Ef thar is, I didn't know it. Boyees, is it so? Who knows? Let ther man speak out!"

No one spoke out. The case was as Zora had said, but it was impossible at that moment to unmask the men who had been in the scheme. Each one held his peace and wished he was miles away.

"So no one will shoulder the blame?" resumed Zora, sarcastically. "Of course, you won't; you dare not. Now, as to the Stinger's Bar bugbear. Who says Blake is working for the Bar against Big Nugget Bend? Who backs the claim?"

Evidently, no one craved the honor; no voice was raised to take the responsibility.

"Silence, again! Men, you should be ashamed. To-day, at noon, not one of you would have harmed Blake. You were all quick to say he was not responsible for what he did. Then, you called him a crank; now, you say he is a spy from Stinger's Bar. Some one has been tampering with you. Who is it?"

For a little while there was no answer, but it was noticeable that the crowd was steadily growing smaller. Before the logic of one little woman's mind the lynchers were losing their courage and fading away.

No one felt more miserable and frightened than Tim Hexam, but he had to stay and stand the storm.

"Tamperin', Miss Zora? I don't reckon thar has been anything o' that sort. We has very likely gone wild a bit an' gone too fast on a suspicion, but we've done it on ther squar'. But ef we're wrong, I, fur one, am ready ter cave. What say, boys?"

"I say we hev been fools an' we'd better git," replied a voice from the crowd, and deserters might have been seen going in every direction.

Even Tim Hexam, muttering something not understood, was glad to join the procession, and only a few of the most moderate men stayed with Zora and Deacon Stonefist.

The latter had stood like a statue from the moment he was released, but the girl now turned to him.

"You are free, sir," she said, growing reserved and cold.

"For which fact I am indebted to you," he evenly replied.

"Yes," she replied, "I have paid my debt, and that, too, much sooner than I expected. We are now on equal footing."

"Yes," he replied, quietly. "I am compelled to thank you for what you have done, and I say that you have unusual courage. I regret, however, that it has been shown by facing a mob and beating them in their own peculiar line."

"Don't let that worry you," she retorted. "If you are tired of life, the rope is still here."

"I am not tired of life, nor will I take into my mortal hands that which should only be guided by the Creator of life. I was speaking of yourself. You are a young woman, and as such you should not mix and talk with riotous men as you have done to-night."

Evidently nothing, not even the shadow of death, could make the Deacon forget his ruling passion. Reform must go on though the earth quaked and the air was touched to the point of a howling cyclone.

Zora, however, was so angry that she stamped her little foot on the earth, which seemed as gifted with feelings as this man.

"Never mind!" she cried; "you and I need not say any more. As I before remarked, I have paid my debt, and as I now owe you nothing I will not submit to your freaks. I have listened to all the lectures I care to hear. From this time I desire you to refrain from speaking to me. We are strangers!"

"Misguided girl, this exhibition of temper is very unseemly. Because I have tried to turn your mind from vain and frivolous ways you regard me as your enemy. Is truth, uprightness and honor to be despised? Wretched girl—"

Blake was each moment becoming more and more severe, his incisive voice ringing out sharply, and she interrupted him unceremoniously.

"You must not expect other people to be like you. Your temperament is that of the Arctic region; mine, that of Colorado. I have my eyes fixed upon earth; yours are seeking for the North Pole, which no man ever discovered, or ever will. I have no desire to be a preacher myself, but it seems to me that if any one had saved my life at the moment when it was about to be lost, I would not turn upon them with harsh and insolent words!"

"Young woman—"

"My name, sir, is Miss Lockyard, and by that I will be called or by nothing. But you need not take the trouble to address me at all, nor to think of me. From this time we are strangers; I am going my way; go you yours!"

And at the last word the girl did indeed go her way, hastening from the spot. Once, Blake called after her, but she did not turn, and soon disappeared from his view.

"It is the way of the world," said the reformer harshly. "Evil has so entered into the people of the day that warnings are despised and reviled. Alas! for the generation!"

CHAPTER XII.

JACK BUNKER PLOTS ANEW.

THE attempted lynching of Blake caused a good deal of talk at the Bend. It was generally admitted that the so-called reformer was not responsible for what he did. He was not, perhaps, strictly insane, but he was certainly deranged; he was popularly called a crank, while those who wished to avoid the term, spoke of him as a monomaniac.

There was some mystery about the crusade of Judge Lynch, and no one seemed to know who was at the head of it. Had not Deacon Stonefist angered Zora anew, her theory of foul play might have got abroad and led to a revelation, but as she kept silent it was supposed to have been an unpremeditated uprising of the miners.

No official notice was taken of the matter, partly because no regular official existed at the Bend; and there was a general feeling that Judge Lynch, having seen he was hasty, repented, and that the crank in broadcloth was free and safe to walk the streets thereafter.

Jack Bunker and Warfield were discussing the matter at their usual haunt, and neither was in an amiable mood.

"I told you how it would work," said Warfield, irritably. "At least, I said there was failure and danger in it. According to what Hexam reported to you, the Lockyard girl openly declared there was a plot. I expect to see you arrested before night, my friend."

"But I don't," Bunker replied. "Thar ain't no use o' shuttin' a feller's eyes ter facts, an' I admit ther game was a mist'ee, but I hev leetle fear fur ther result. It seems Zora an' ther 'crank' had a row ter wind up with, an' that lets me out. Besides, nobody but Hexam could give me away, an' by doin' it he would so criminate himself that he'd go up ther flume. I feel safe."

"Well, I hope you are, for the sake of our other work."

"So do I," Bunker acknowledged.

"Then act as though you did. Hang it! I like to play every card for all it's worth when I go into a job. I've scored some first-class successes, but always on that principle. Now, Zora knew you had quarreled with Blake, and she will be a fool if she don't suspect who put on Judge Lynch's spurs."

"Bein' able ter prove an *alibi*, let her spect."

Warfield hurled a few remarks at Bunker's head of a type more emphatic than polite, adding a fervent wish that he would not "be a fool."

"Your way an' mine are diff'rent," Bunker replied. "You are high-toned, an' such men are creepin' cats; I'm a rough-an'-ready galoot, an' of an order that goes with a rattle an' bang. But ef you think I don't banker fur old Lockyard's gold, you make a mistake. Who started ther idee? Who sent fur you an' laid ther Quickstep plot?"

"My dear sir, I know you're in earnest—sometimes, I even suspect you are more in earnest than I know."

"What d'ye mean?"

The two looked each other in the face—Warfield keen, critical, and suspicious; Bunker, aggressive and curious.

"I suspect there is something back. Are you sure you don't know old Lockyard personally?"

"Of course I don't!"

"You have the air of one after revenge."

"Bah! you let yer imagination run away with common-sense. All I'm arter is his money."

"You have always declined to tell me how you, of all the world, knew that this simple old man had so much money."

"Wal, that's none o' your business," Bunker bluntly said. "See hyar, ef you want ter back out o' this game, say so, and let me know it."

"I mean to stay in," Warfield coolly said; "in fact, it is necessary for us to hang together."

"Why?"

"Because neither of us can fleece Lockyard alone."

"Can't we? S'pose I put some other man in your place?"

"Now you come right down to bed-rock," Warfield said, with a cold smile. "Let us understand each other, Partner, if you kick me out I shall go to Lockyard and say: 'Beware of Jack Bunker; he means you harm!'"

In speaking so plainly, Warfield expected an outburst in keeping with Bunker's nature, but none came. For a moment the rough fellow was silent, and then broke into a laugh.

"Old man, you're a fool!" he said, but not in anger. "An' it may be I'm another—you prob'ly know that best. See hyar, we're in ther game tergether an' we must s'ick. Nate Lockyard must buy a share in ther Quickstep an' hand over his money ter us thar'by. From this out we'll pull more evenly, an' I'll let Deacon Broadcloth alone, ez you say. Now, then?"

His manner was fair enough, and though Warfield had some lurking suspicions, they drank each other's health in Parrott's best whisky.

Then Bunker said good-day and left the hotel. He went at once to the shanty where Horace Kellogg made his home.

Lockyard's nephew was "bard up;" he was always hard up. Even in the old days when his uncle was foolish enough to give him money, he squandered it about as quick as a cyclone.

I scatter a dust heap, and it was his chronic state to be hard up.

For some time he had lived in the shanty, barely getting his living by gambling and like pursuits.

It was there that Jack Bunker descended on him one day and proposed an elaborate scheme for getting possession of Lockyard's money. Horace had jumped at the chance. He had often had such dreams in the past, himself, but he lacked the brains to plan and execute, being a weak-headed, though thoroughly unscrupulous, rascal.

At the time our story begins, however, he was very sanguine and looked upon Bunker as his good demon—we had almost said, good angel.

Entering the shanty, Jack found it vacant and he sat down to await Horace's coming.

"I am goin' ter put a rod in pickle fur Master Kellogg that'll give him a pass o'er ther river," thought Jack. "I was a fool ter take him inter ther game so soon, anyhow. If this Quickstep business works, Kellogg is no more needed than a fifth wheel ter a wagon. Wal, he's ez easy got rid on, anyhow, an' he won't eucher me outer nothin'."

The fellow paused to chuckle and then continued:

"He little knows who I am, or how I've come hundreds o' miles ter clean out Lockyard. Knowin' what I do o' ther world, hows'ever, it's my advice when thar is a big wind ter look fur a drama in ther past. Many a leetle tragedy may be explained on that footin', an' ef I was ter go ter Nate Lockyard an' say who I really be, I reckon he would recognize me. Wal, I reckon!"

He ceased to mutter as the door opened and Kellogg appeared. He came in with a scowl on his face, but brightened as he saw his visitor.

"Hello, boyee," said Jack, bluffly, "what's gone wrong?"

"Better ask what's gone right," said Horace, as he dropped into a chair. "I've been playing poker and have lost my last red."

"Moral, let poker alone."

"And starve?"

"You can't eat poker, an' ef you lose at it 'tis only a question o' time 'bout starvin', anyhow. But, take this an' cheer up."

Jack tossed a coin to his companion and then resumed.

"I hear you failed ter enter ther school ez a pupil."

"Yes," said Horace, sullenly.

"Why?"

"Miss Lawrence wouldn't take me."

"Possible? I c'd guess all that, pard. What I wanted was her reasons?"

"She said I was as well educated as herself."

"Ther blazes! Did you go thar an' fling on style an' big words?"

"I tried to make a good impression."

"Good thunder! Ef you had talked ez I can't help talkin', an' showed yourself uneducated, you'd got inter ther school all right. No fear o' that. But, don't ye see she tumbled ter ther fact you was thar with a motive not in ther schoolin' line."

"What did she care if she got my money?"

"That ain't ther question, seein' we know she did care. Ther question is, what'll you do now—back out?"

Horace brought his fist down on the table and plainly uttered a negative.

"I'll b'lieve I see whar ther trouble lays," continued Bunker, watching his dupe like a cat.

"Where?"

"Allen Sterling is ahead o' ye."

"He is?"

"I judge so, for he goes often ter see her."

"Malediction! I remember he went there just after I left. Oh! yes, I see! Mr. Allen Sterling is my rival and the favored one in all the king's dominion. Bunker, I'm glad you put me on the track, and curse me if I don't make him sweat. I carry a revolver and I know how to use it, and what is more I will use it. Out goes Sterling."

Bunker had brought matters around to the proper point, and he held the wheel steady. He played on Kellogg's mood as on a piano and extracted music every time he touched a key. He talked philosophy, too, and, assuming to know all about the female sex and their ways, declared that Kellogg had only to put Sterling out of the way and Miss Lawrence would fall into his arms.

"No heart is so mighty tame ez ther heart caught on ther rebound," added Bunker.

He left his dupe in a far more hopeful humor than he found him, while his own spirits were at their best.

"I am a sort o' an Iago in this case. Kellogg is in my way as Lockyard's nephew, an' Sterling is in ther way as Lockyard's clerk. Ef ther old man tells him o' ther Quickstep, I'm afeard I shall step out quick. Well, like Iago, I will play my two enemies ag'in' each other, an' ter change Shakespeare a bit, I kin say: 'Whether Kellogg kill Sterling, or Sterling kill Kellogg, or each do kill the other, I shall see ther pot.'"

Some people might cavil at this quotation of the master of English drama, but there could be no doubt but Bunker had the proper idea, and there was surely a good deal of Iago nature about him.

But what was his exact game against Nathan Lockyard, or what was the cause of it, or what he aimed to do, it seemed that no man except himself in Big Nugget Bend knew.

CHAPTER XIII.

LOOKING FOR A PRETEXT.

HORACE KELLOGG had become thoroughly imbued with the idea Bunker wished to put into his mind. Accepting Bunker as his oracle, he believed he saw Sterling between him and his triumph with Althea Lawrence. Recognizing the teacher as an honorable woman, he believed the reason she would not smile on him to be that she had already given her affections to Sterling; while he was equally ready to believe that if the clerk was out of the way he would succeed to her favor.

That he was wholly wrong the reader already knows; Althea was, if anything, less agreeable in her deportment toward Sterling than toward him; but the poor fool failed to see the light, and went straight on in the path Bunker would have him tread.

He cleaned up his revolvers with a special reference to making Sterling his target, and then meditated.

"How is it to be done? Of course I can't shoot him down without a pretext, for not only would Althea object to that, but Big Nugget Bend would rise on its hind legs and howl. Hang it! why is it such a moral town? Well, then, I must have an excuse for shooting him. What shall it be?"

Meditation suggested a good many ways, but, as he rejected the whole of them as unfeasible, they need not be outlined here. He pondered on the subject more or less all day, but only succeeded in muddling his weak mind hopelessly.

The desired pretext did not put in an appearance.

As the hour approached for Miss Lawrence to dismiss her school, however, he was seized by an earnest desire to look upon her, if only from a distance. She would come out at the usual hour, of course, and if he could not speak to her he could at least see her go past.

Acting on this idea he made his way to ride north of the village, and at a point just back of the school-house.

It was a wild and romantic place, with plenty of rocks piled up in a hap-hazard way, but Horace took a practical view of the case. He found a seat beneath a small tree and sat down to watch.

In due time there was evidence that the school was breaking up. Several children came out, proceeded homeward, and as the juvenile population of the Bend was small the watcher knew the supply could not last a great while.

Last of all came she for whom he watched, but not alone. A small girl was with her, and Horace recognized the teacher's favorite, Betty Pollack.

He expected to see them go to their homes, but his heart gave a thump as they turned toward the ridge. He saw Althea look upward and was foolish enough to imagine, for a time, that she had discovered and was coming to him.

Coming she certainly was, for, with little Betty by her side, she reached the foot of the rocks and began to climb.

Horace watched with rapt attention, and to any one it would have been an interesting picture; Althea was so beautiful and graciously dignified, but always kind to the child and aided her short steps, and Betty so eager and quaint, her sharp little voice ringing out ever and anon.

But the watcher's interest increased as they came directly toward him. Had he really been seen? Was the visit meant for him? He did not know, so he hid behind a point of rock.

Nearer came the couple until they paused not twenty feet from Horace.

"Here we are at our throne," said Althea, seating herself on the rock where it was hollowed out by Nature like a great arm-chair.

"I's glad," said Betty. "Reckon we is boff pretty tried; I is, 'tena'rate. S'pect I never could ketch a mountain goat."

"That isn't the kind of game young ladies hunt," said Miss Lawrence, with her grave smile.

Betty looked at her with expanded eyes.

"Does they hunt men?" she demanded.

Althea laughed.

"Not if they are wise, Betty."

"But I heerd somebody say it took Sam Jenkins's wife forty years ter ketch a husband, so I s'posed they hunted men."

"Mrs. Jenkins may have done so, but we will not. You and I, Betty, will be wiser. I almost wish I could live always in some such place as this, and never see a man."

Horace had been stirred up mentally by finding the woman he admired so near him, and at this point he could not avoid stepping from his hiding-place.

"Men will come where beauty is, even though it be on a mountain," he said, with what he intended for a captivating bow.

Miss Lawrence was plainly surprised, but she did not start. Horace saw her lips curl with scorn, and she sarcastically answered:

"They come uninvited, however."

"Don't be so sure; I was here first," he replied. "You came to me, and I am pleased to see you."

There was subdued anger in her eyes, but she did not deign to answer him. Instead, she turned to Betty.

"Come," she said, quietly; "we will find another place; one where we can be alone."

She was going away with such an utter disregard of his presence that Horace lost all sense of prudence, and stepped directly in front of her.

"Wait!" he said, in a husky voice. "I want to know what you mean by so persistently insulting me."

"In what way have I insulted you, sir?"

"Am I a dog that you will not so much as speak to me civilly?"

"Am I not a woman and deserving of gentlemanly treatment from you?"

The retort was ready enough, but she remained unexpectedly calm.

"In what way have I failed?"

"You have tried to force your company upon me."

"And you scorn it?"

"I scorn no one; but if I do not care for one's acquaintance I have the right to decline. Pardon me, but you force me to speak plainly."

"I see; you reserve all your tender care for Sterling!" bitterly exclaimed Kellogg.

"For whom, sir?"

"For Sterling, I say. I believe you know him!"

The last remark was intended to be crushingly sarcastic.

"I have seen and spoken to Mr. Sterling, but if you really think he is anything to me you are mistaken. We are not friends. And I will say, moreover, that I did not come to Colorado to have favorites or to indulge in favorites. You have seen that I am a poor and friendless girl. As such I am here to try to gain a comfortable living; that is all. I do not wish to receive attentions from any gentleman."

"All very well in theory, but it don't satisfy me."

"I do not know, sir, that I am obliged to please you. Now, having made my position plain, I beg that you will step aside and let me pass."

"No, by my life; not till you have made amends for your scornful ways!" he cried, losing his head, and forgetting for the time all

the good advice keener-witted Jack Bunker had given him.

"What do you mean, sir?"

"Give me your pledge to receive me as your friend."

"I will not, sir!" Althea exclaimed, losing her temper at last.

"Just as you say, my lady."

"Let me pass, please."

"To repeat your own words, I will not!"

He was looking at her in an evil and insolent way, and the battle seemed all in his own hands, but no one can tell what a breath of time may bring forth.

Horace Kellogg was suddenly lifted and set aside, and then Althea saw Allen Sterling, his hat in one hand and a rifle in the other.

"You can go now, Miss Lawrence," he said, with grave politeness.

But Althea did not go. She knew the probable result of leaving these men alone, and, as her heart was all good, if she was a trifle proud and reserved, she would not leave one who had twice acted as her defender to meet Kellogg's anger alone.

She remained, and she saw the young villain, recovering from his first shock of surprise, turn upon Allen with a furious look on his face.

"What do you mean, you scoundrel, by interfering here?" he hotly demanded.

"We will speak of this matter later," Sterling replied, in a low voice.

"We will speak of it now!" Kellogg declared.

"You forget a lady is present."

"I don't care if there are ten thousand ladies present. You have laid your hands on me, you, an office drudge, and your touch is contamination. I will have satisfaction!"

Even in the midst of his anger, Kellogg remembered that the desired pretext for a quarrel with Sterling had come to him and was greatly pleased that it was so.

"I have no intention of leaving the Bend, and you can find me any time you wish. For the present let us say nothing. Miss Lawrence, do you wish to go?"

She glanced from his face to that of Kellogg, as though to see if the threatened trouble had died away, but she was soon shown. Kellogg had been waiting for his chance, and at this juncture he leaped forward and closed with Sterling.

His purpose was at once apparent. At the point where they stood, the rock, after running out a few feet in a shelf-like form, abruptly descended for twenty feet, while at the base were sharp and jagged rocks.

He had aimed to hurl Sterling over by his first rush—over to fall on rocks likely to dash life from his body.

Allen's indignation arose at this murderous assault, and, grappling in turn, he not only evaded the fate intended for him but forced Horace rapidly back.

A struggle of fifteen seconds was enough to settle one point; Allen was the better man of the two and could easily have sent his enemy over the ledge.

Not caring to commit such a deed, he threw him heavily and, falling upon him, left the fellow unconscious.

Then, once again, the victor turned toward Althea, as calm and respectful as though nothing had occurred.

"I would suggest, Miss Lawrence," he said, "that you leave here before this man recovers. The mischief may not be gone from him, and while he is getting his senses back you can return to the village."

CHAPTER XIV.

A DUEL BEFORE SUNRISE.

STRANGELY enough there was more color than usual in Althea's face then, though many a woman would have been pale after such an encounter, and her answer to Sterling's last speech was in a more womanly tone than she had ever spoken to him before.

"I will go, but only on condition that you will accompany me."

Allen's heart leaped, for not for a moment had he ceased to care for the school-teacher, and this was a perceptible gain in his suit; but he tried to hide his ripple of exultation and answer calmly.

"Certainly, Miss Lawrence; I was just going that way. I have been out on a hunt."

He glanced once more at Kellogg, but he knew the fellow would soon recover and they left him there. He could care for himself when he recovered and it might soothe the smart of his discomfiture a little to know he had found a "pretext" for quarreling with Sterling.

The latter lifted Betty from a lower part of the rock, Althea followed—he did not venture to offer aid to her, as none was really needed—and they went on toward the village.

"This is the second time you have helped me, Mr. Sterling," said Althea, showing an embarrassment not usual to her. "It may not help me in your estimation, but I feel called upon to apologize for my rudeness in the past. I wonder you were willing to help me now; I don't think I should have been, if similarly placed."

But if your experience with me has been disagreeable, it is no more than the lot of all who know me; I am not an agreeable person. Let me say one word in defense of myself, however. I am in Colorado under peculiar circumstances and am for the time a victim of fate. I have been obliged to deal coldly with many who would have been my friends in the past and must continue to do so in the future."

She made this long speech slowly, selecting every word with a care which surprised Sterling. He felt some natural bewilderment as she went on, but all else vanished at the end, when by a delicately conveyed hint she dashed his hopes to the ground.

"It seems to me you are young to forswear the world," he gravely said.

"I have not done that entirely; I hope to leave this life some time."

"And what then of those who would be your friends now?"

He asked the question as delicately as possible, but he knew she understood.

"I don't know," she slowly answered.

"Friends are not always to be found."

"You have a meaning, but I do not understand."

"Therefore, is it not best to retain them when found?"

He asked the question in a manner at which she could not complain, and he was pleased to see her consider it seriously.

"Perhaps you are right," she said, "but I am so peculiarly situated that I cannot say much; I dare not."

"You dare not?"

"I dare not."

He looked at her in surprise.

"You think me a very peculiar person, do you not? Well, I am. More people than you have tried in vain to understand me; if you try you will only fail."

"But if I am content with your friendship, without seeking to understand?"

"Ah! now you go too far. I have not said my friendship is yours—but I have not said it is not yours. But here we are at the village; let us part for now. When we meet next I shall use you in a more becoming manner than when you called at the school-house, and—I hope you will overlook my imperfections."

"I have never discovered any," he could not help saying. "But here we will part, as you said. One word, first. The man we saw on the mountain may annoy you further. If he does, I hope you will let me know. Since you have no relative here I will care for Mr. Kellogg and ask no payment."

"I fear you have more cause to look out for him than I have."

"On the contrary, he seems more inclined to persecute women than men. But, of that, anon. Remember what I have said and—good-night!"

He lifted his hat and turned away. And as Althea walked homeward, Betty Pollack, marching gravely and silently at her side, wondered to find her teacher in so sober a mood.

A few hours later a man walked into the money-lender's office where his clerk was alone.

"Mr. Allen Sterling?" questioned the newcomer, stiffly.

"That's my name, sir," the clerk replied.

"Mine is Benway. I am a friend of Horace Kellogg."

"Yes?" questioned Allen.

"Yes. Mr. Kellogg considers that he has been grossly insulted by you."

"When?" asked Allen, as though making an effort to remember.

"To-day, sir, and on the mountain. I may add that he has a black eye."

"Raw beef will bring it around all right," carelessly replied Sterling.

"Raw blood is what he wants!" said Benway, fiercely.

"Possible? What's the matter with its being cooked?"

"Sir, I did not come here to be insulted."

"Then, what in thunder did you come for?" demanded Sterling, enjoying the situation.

"I'm the bearer of a challenge from Mr. Kellogg to you. He demands satisfaction for your treatment of him; he demands that you meet him at Lasso Gulch, at sunrise, to-morrow, there to fight a duel to the death with revolvers."

"Considering that he claims the right to settle all the other points himself, I wonder he didn't insist on my staying at home so that he could fight all alone."

"He wants you for a target, sir."

"Oh! why the dickens didn't you mention the fact at first? Then, it is only in sport?"

Sterling looked innocent and Benway gasped and glared at him most ferociously. He was angry enough to commit an assault on the provoking clerk, but he noticed the development of his body and arms and thought better of it.

He swallowed twice and then replied:

"I tell you it is a duel to the death. Will you fight?"

"Rather than to have any hard feelings, I will. Yes, Mr. Benway, I'll drop around half

an hour before sunrise and we'll blaze away at each other."

"Remember it is to the death!"

"You did say so, didn't you? It had escaped my mind. Say, will you just mention it again in the morning, so I won't forget to put a cartridge in my revolver?"

"Will you be serious?" demanded Benway, with a groan.

Sterling was obliging enough to say he would. He dropped his hanting air and became serious enough to suit Benway. He accepted the challenge, agreed to the place and time of meeting, and to the weapons; and when the messenger went away, there was a prospect of bloodshed not far off.

Daybreak found Kellogg and his second on the ground. The gulch was gloomy and damp, and Benway feared for his principal's courage, but Horace was not a coward.

At last Sterling turned around a point of rock and advanced toward them. He was accompanied by Daddy Clover, who seemed just a trifle less drunk than usual.

"What's that old fool here for?" muttered Kellogg.

"Just what we will ask Sterling."

The latter came up smoking a cigar, and nodded pleasantly. The smoke of battle did not show around him at all.

"Nice morning for the shooting, gentlemen," he observed.

"It's well enough," said Benway, surlily; "but why have you brought that old idiot?"

He pointed to Daddy Clover.

"Why, I thought we were to have seconds."

"So you are, but—"

"Well, Mr. Clover is my second."

"Fact, gen'tlum," said Daddy, with dignity. "Had important business on my hands which should have been 'ended to, but come jest ter oblige you. Like ter see boyees o' spirit, I do; an' I may add, I like ter see any kind o' spirit. Got a flask with you?"

Benway turned to Sterling.

"I am tempted to strike you," he said, hotly.

"Do it," was the cool reply, "and you will not strike another blow for a week."

Benway did not strike.

"Do you seriously present this man as your second?"

"Yes."

"A miserable drunkard—"

"Not at all," said Clover, genially. "I've had half a pint this mornin' an' I'm happy, not miserable."

"What do we care?" said Kellogg, a sudden gleam in his eyes as they thought that the old man might possibly be over-reached. "All we want is to have the duel go on. Arrange the preliminaries, men."

"That's ther idee," said Daddy genially. "I'll pace off ther requisite distance ter onc'l."

He started to carry out his idea, but his unsteady legs wobbled around so that it looked as though he was trying to describe the shape of a rail-fence.

Kellogg and his man were surprised at the way affairs were going, but a few words together made them sincerely pleased that Clover was to officiate. Benway happened to have a blank cartridge, and it was decided to slip it into the weapon to be used by Sterling, trusting that the drunkard's dim eyes would not detect the cheat.

Sterling sat down on a bowlder and proceeded to placidly finish his cigar while the seconds arranged the preliminaries. Daddy Clover made a great show of wisdom; so great, in fact, that he betrayed lamentable ignorance.

They loaded the revolvers together, and Benway quietly slipped the blank cartridge into the one he intended for Sterling, Clover allowing him to do the work under the excuse that his fingers were "a bit stiff from ther cold."

It was rank murder as the plotters had arranged it, but they came of a stock that cared nothing for that; they were more than willing that Sterling should be shot down without a chance for his life.

And so he would, unless the unexpected happened.

CHAPTER XV.

DADDY CLOVER LOOKS THROUGH THE BARRELS.

"I BELIEVE we are all ready," said Benway, as he put in the last cartridge.

"Hol' on a bit," said Clover; "thar is one more preliminary."

"What is 'bat?"

"Ther barrels may be clogged up. Hev knowed men ter miss a target afore now 'cause a spider had spun his web in ther barrel. The variation o' a bullet, even though it be ther fraction o' a hair's diameter, often spiles a good shot. Lemme look in ther barrel."

His drunken gravity made Benway smile, and he handed over the revolvers, taking care that they were not mixed. Clover looked into the shining tubes with owl-like wisdom, and then removed his hat.

"Reckon I'll try them a bit," he said; and before Benway could protest he had pointed one inside his hat and pulled the trigger.

An explosion followed, and then Clover held his hat higher, his look of wisdom increasing.

"Sing'lar fact!" he observed.

"What is it?" Benway uneasily asked.

"Thar bullet in that thar cartridge must hev been a durned curious piece o' lead. Thar ain't no hole through my hat!"

Benway began to feel uncomfortable. The revolver used had been the one intended for Sterling; the one without any lead in it, and that showed why there was no hole in the old man's hat.

"I'll try t'other," resumed Clover, and he did as he said.

This time a lump of lead went tearing through his hat.

"Nuther sing'lar fact; don't understand it," said he.

"Let me explain," said a voice at his elbow, and he turned to see Sterling. The latter, still carelessly puffing his cigar, added: "You see, Daddy, our friends took us for fools, and put a blank cartridge in one revolver; the one intended for me. It was their game to have me shot down without a chance for my life!"

"What do you mean, sir?" blustered Benway, but he lost color in spite of his show of indignation.

"Simply that when you pick up Daddy Clover for a fool you get taken in. We suspected the character of the honorable gentlemen with whom we had to deal, and let them set their trap. We sprung it, but we are not caught. Enough said; load up again, and let the show proceed."

He walked away as carelessly as ever, and as Daddy invited Benway to reload the latter had no words in which to decline. In fact, he felt chilled and dumfounded, and it was a conundrum to him how to explain away what had occurred and leave him his reputation as a "square man." Of course he could throw the blame on the makers of the cartridges, but after what Sterling had said he felt it would be useless.

Once more the revolvers were loaded; this time in proper shape, for Benway had grown afraid of Daddy Clover, and the principals were invited to take their places.

They did so, and weapons in hand, faced each other. A marked contrast was perceptible in their manner. Sterling remained cool, but the discovery of his murderous plot had upset Kellogg's nerves, and his hand shook as he took the revolver.

The tide was turned, and the seekers for blood would have gladly thrown up the sponge.

Benway took Daddy Clover aside.

"Is there no hope of a compromise?" he asked.

"Not a shadder!" Daddy replied. "My man is jest ready ter run out his tongue an' pant fur gore. Thar's a bucketful on't in his eye. Ot' he's a desperate galoot when he gets ter goin', now you jest bet!"

"If either one of them survives he will be lynched."

"Sartainly, an' you'll find me thar ter pull on ther rope. You'n me git all ther fun, Ben, an' none o' ther danger. Come, let's wrastle this thing off'm ther books, an' then go down ter Pepper's an' get b'ilin'."

Benway could say no more, and as he saw Kellogg so unfit for work he mentally decided he would have to wear a weed for his principal during the next month.

It was his duty to count for the duelists, and he began:

"One!"

The revolvers were raised.

"Two!"

The men took aim. Sterling was as cool as ever, but Horace Kellogg's hand shook worse than ever.

A third word came, but it was not from Benway, nor in a masculine voice. Such was its tone, all were surprised, and the duelists paused and turned their faces toward the side of the gulch from which the voice had sounded.

Two persons had appeared; Althea Lawrence and Betty Pollack.

They came forward rapidly, the small girl clinging to her teacher, and the latter looking stern and angry. Dead silence reigned among the men as she approached; her coming had proved more potent than would have a score of men from the Bend.

"So these are the two men who aspire to commit murder!" she said, looking at the duelists with scorn imprinted on her face. "Truly, it is a rare honor!"

"Thar's nuthin' half so sweet in life," observed Daddy Clover, but no one heeded him.

The duelists stood mute, and on Sterling's face was a look of shame and sorrow. He had gone to the field from a mistaken sense of honor, but it was clear Miss Lawrence would not give him credit for it. And Kellogg was abashed, though he had nothing to gain or lose.

"I had thought," resumed the lady, "that the barbarous practice of dueling had been left behind in this enlightened age, but I see there are some men who do not think like me."

"My dear madame," began Benway, "it is the salve of wounded honor—"

"Enough, sir; I wish to address my remarks to the principals in this affair. Come nearer!"

Her face was imperious, but they silently obeyed.

"Has this meeting resulted from your former quarrel?" she continued.

"Yes," said Sterling, looking at the ground.

"Who sent the challenge?"

There was a moment's silence, and then Kellogg acknowledged the doubtful honor.

"And you aspire to be a murderer?"

She spoke with cutting sarcasm, which brought a spark of courage to the surface.

"I am not a child," said Horace, defiantly.

"I was grossly insulted by this man, and I sought relief by the only means open to me. I claim honor for it, since the usual way is to shoot at one's enemy at sight, and without warning."

"Plainly, Bartholomew Blake has found an ample field for his labors," she said, quickly. "Big Nugget Bend does, indeed, need purifying if such is its creed."

"It will come around all right if a few more cranks get hold of the bell-rope," Kellogg retorted.

Althea turned from him to the other duelist.

"And you, sir?" she questioned.

"Perhaps it is as well for me to say nothing. I was challenged, and, as I would not be branded a coward, I came here. Judged from a higher plane there is no excuse for it and I will not attempt to reply."

He did not speak defiantly or stubbornly and she knew it; she could see the shame and sorrow on his face very plainly. Something like a kindlier look appeared on her own face, but it was no time to reveal the fact.

"And what will you do now?" she asked.

Daddy Clover pushed to the front.

"I move that we take a drink all around—at the duelists' expense—an' let this cruel war be over," he blandly suggested.

"Yes; let the matter drop," said Benway, anxious to be on the winning side.

No one objected, and after a few more words all prepared to depart. There was no pretense at reconciliation—an empty form at best—nor did Miss Lawrence suggest any. Both principals prepared to go with their seconds. Both had the tact to refrain from asking permission to see the lady safely home; but Daddy Clover was not so modest. He offered his escort and received a refusal which left him staring with wide open eyes as Althea went away alone.

He speedily recovered, however, and on the homeward road had a good deal to say. Sterling heard little of it. He was cursing his folly for accepting the challenge. He was a brave man and he valued his reputation; but he felt at that moment that he would rather be branded a coward throughout Big Nugget Bend than to have lost Althea's lately won favor.

Reaching the money-lender's office, he found Zora at the desk. Lockyard was not visible.

"I want to ask you something, Allen," said the girl, abruptly. "Do you know anything about the lawyer they call Old Ketchum?"

"No, nothing in particular," replied the clerk, recalling his wandering thoughts. "I have merely seen him on the street."

"He was here to see father last night, and it was his second visit. The first threw father into deep dejection and the second has increased it."

The lawyer is worrying him, somehow, but I can't learn how. Now what is the trouble?"

She looked at Allen in a way which brought all his mind to business. He almost regarded her as a sister, and her troubles were his. He thought for a moment, but as he did not know of any business with Old Ketchum he could not see how he could trouble the money-lender. So far as he knew, all Lockyard's ventures were small and simple—he knew nothing of the Quickstep affair.

So he acknowledged his ignorance on the subject.

"I wish you would find out," said Zora.

"Well, I'll try."

"Something is worrying father; something serious. He denies it, but I am not to be deceived. If an Old Ketchum—I hate the sight of that man, Allen—he has in some way tangled himself with father's business in the past and is trying to blackmail him, as they call it. Of course, father never did anything wrong; but there may have been some error in legal papers or something, you know. Don't you laugh, but I think the law is a wretched humbug."

Allen did not laugh, and he agreed to try and learn the secret of Old Ketchum's power to worry the money-lender.

CHAPTER XVI.

MORE ABOUT THE QUICKSTEP MINE.

THE rough experience of Bartholomew Blake with the lynchers had not made an iota of change in his way of doing business. He took no steps to have his assailants identified and punished, and as he did not refer to the matter they took it for granted he had forgotten it in a measure.

But as a reformer he went unswervingly on his way and spared no one. Few indeed were the people whom he had not told, in his peculiar way, that they were leading most miserable and wicked lives. Rich and poor were served alike,

and all were lashed unsparingly. If they did go to ruin it would not be because Blake had not warned them.

Near the center of the village was a large building known as the "Right Bower." Besides these words there was painted on the sign an image which those not versed in card lore would have mistaken for an old English cavalier, and around him were four spots like the mystic signs of "spades," "hearts," "clubs" and "diamonds" so dear to the sporting-man.

In brief, it was a gambling-house.

The evening before the duel the place was well crowded and playing was brisk. Sharpers and miners mingled and tried their luck, and as they played liquor stood at their elbow and revolvers nestled on their persons.

In the midst of it all the door opened and a singular figure appeared at the threshold; a man whose presence there marked a new epoch in gambling. It was Bartholomew Blake, but no one chanced to notice him; the infatuation of gambling was on them and they could only see the game.

The reformer stood in silence for a while, as motionless as the walls, gazing on the scene. His appearance was as usual. His Quaker-like hat, long, straight hair, clean-shaven face and suit of black, with the long, double-breasted coat buttoned to his chin—all was as usual.

And as he looked on the men before him, severe and righteous wrath were visible on his harsh face and in his cold, steel-like eyes.

For a full moment he looked, and then he strode to the nearest table. Four men were there, all intent on their game. Their faces were set and anxious; their eyes had a wolf-like gleam as they sought to read each other's faces; even their breathing seemed to keep time to the devouring suspense of the minute.

One of them reached forward to drop his card on the table when a white, slender hand passed over his shoulder and clasped his wrist.

"Pause!" said a warning voice. "Pause, wretched man!"

The gambler dropped his cards and sprung to his feet with a suddenness which overturned his chair. For the moment he did not doubt but he was in the grasp of the ruler of the lost, and his bronzed face was pale as he turned around.

The "reformer" stood in an impressive attitude, erect and stern, one hand stretched out over the table and his steel-like eyes unwavering.

But the alarm of the gamblers vanished at the sight.

"Deacon Broadcloth!" one of them muttered, in disgust.

The ripple had run through the room, card-playing was generally suspended and all eyes were on the crank of the Bend.

"That is right, men," he said, in his peculiar, incisive voice. "Drop your cards and swear never to touch them again. They are the weapons devised by the enemy of mankind to drag him down to ruin; they are the ticket, of lost souls. Unite, men, to-night, and with one accord leave temptation behind you. The safest way,"—here he gathered up a pack at one motion—"is to burn them!"

And at the last word he cast the pasteboards into the fire.

A roar of anger followed the act as the owner saw his loss. Less than a week before he had paid a dollar for the toys then bending and smoking in the blaze—and Big Nugget Bend was not a rich town.

One leap he made forward and his ready revolver was at the Deacon's breast; one moment the latter's life hung poised as by a thread; but his hand closed over the murderous wrist and the weapon was turned aside just as it was discharged.

And the bullet sped harmlessly upward to find a lodging-place in the roof.

The baffled gambler made an effort to free his wrist, but it was a loss of strength. Without seeming to be at all inconvenienced, Deacon Stonefist held him in a grasp he could not break.

It was not the first time they had seen the man's power, but it would take a good while for them to understand it, so little did his muscle show in his sober suit of black.

But, the first surprise over, more than one man sprung to keep the gambler from disgracing himself by doing harm to one not in his right mind and the two were separated.

But the keeper of the place now had his say.

"How dare you come in here?" he demanded, of Blake.

"I dare go wherever crime flourishes, wherever a warning voice is needed; and, surely, no place more needs correction than this haunt of vice. Here are men squandering their hard-earned money, risking their souls and sinking step by step in infamy."

"Hold right on!" interrupted the proprietor; "I won't have another word!"

"How can you stop me? I speak in a just cause and have no fear."

"I'll make you fear in just one minute if—"

"Miserable wretch, I see your feet press soil near the line from which no man can turn. You are worse than those men who come here

to play, for you keep the place where they are ruined, body and soul!"

Blake had gone as far as he could. Big Nugget Bend had had its amusement with its "crank" before and the day was past; they did not want to be interrupted at their playing and they feared to get into trouble as the lynchers had done; so, at a sign from the proprietor, there was a general rush and the Deacon was forcibly carried out and the door locked upon him.

"Somebody ought ter give that galoot his last sickness."

The speaker was Jack Bunker. He sat at the further side of the room, engaged in a quiet game of poker with a stranger. Luck had served them very impartially, but Jack had found his opponent such good company that he was content to make nothing.

"Why?" carelessly asked the other man, as he dealt the cards for a new game.

"Because he's a humbug."

"A humbug?"

"Yes. Durn a crank, anyhow, sez I! Folks has no business ter be galivantin' about ther kentry with one-half o' their brain hyar an' t'other half thar. That critter'll do somebody harm, bimeby."

The stranger observed that he would probably wander off shortly and conversation drifted away from the crank.

Jones, the stranger, was good company, we have said. He was a generous man, too. He ordered up the liquor like a lord and Bunker drank it like another lord. In fact, Mr. Bunker, who usually governed his taste for liquor admirably, went too far in this case and drank too much with the usual result.

At this period Jones mentioned that he had an ambition. He wished to own a card-room and saloon, himself, and have it fitted up in splendid style. Denver was his promised land. If he had the money, he would go there and start a "place" which would eclipse everything else in the country and make him a grand man among other grand men.

But he acknowledged he hadn't the money.

Bunker meditated. At least, he seemed to do so, but as this part of the evening found no part in his recollection the next day, it is fair to presume he did not meditate so much as he seemed to do.

"S'pose you take a pardner?" he suggested.

"A good idea."

"Warfield's goin' ter take one."

"I don't know Warfield. Who is he?"

"Friend of mine; owner of Quickstep mine."

"I don't think I ever heard o' the mine, either."

"Nobody ever did but Warfield an' me. That's one o' my leetle games you see; wanter raise fifty thousand on it."

"Ah! I see. You're short o' funds an'—"

"No, I ain't," Bunker declared, with drunken gravity. "Got plenty o' money, but hev ter fly low. Got piles o' money!"

"I hope you've put it in a safe bank."

"Tain't in no bank; don't ketch me thar. Banks bu'st; only fools trust them. I put my money whar it'll be safe."

"I wish you'd explain ther way. I may want ter try it some day," said Jones, insinuatingly.

"Sorry, but can't. All men hev secrets; I hev mine. Hev put ther money whar thieves won't corrupt n'r moth get at it. Don't ask me whar; 'portant secret."

Bunker's eyes looked over the table in a glassy way. His brain and hands had lost the power of handling the cards and they lay idly on the table. Jones was wide-awake, but if his manner was to be relied upon he was a hail-fellow-well-met with Bunker. He motioned for more liquor which was brought.

"So Warfield wants a partner in the Quickstep?"

"Yes, but don't you go in; nothin' in it; no money, no mine, no nothin'. It's all cut an' dried; don't you invest."

"I see you believe in taking care of one's money?"

Jones's conversation oscillated from learned to ignorant like a pendulum, but Bunker was too far gone to heed it.

"Take car' o' mine," said Jack. "Had hard work to get it; hold fast now. Get it hid, safe!"

"Where did you bury it?"

"Didn't bury it; didn't say whar 'twas; secret, that."

"A thousand dollars, I think you said."

"Thousand! Fifty thousand, pard, fifty thousand all in one lump. Got it by a neat dodge; goin' ter hang onto it. Goin'—ter—hang—onto—it!"

Mr. Bunker's hands closed around his glass, as though it was his answer, his heavy eyelids fell and his mind lost what little power it had retained. He had kept up as long as he could and gone to pieces entirely when he went.

This fact Mr. Jones firmly established before he left him, for he seemed very anxious to know Jack's way of preserving his money, and when he saw he must give it up he showed strong dissatisfaction; but give it up he finally did and went quietly away, leaving Bunker to sleep it out.

CHAPTER XVII.

WARFIELD GETS HIS ANSWER.

SHORTLY after breakfast, the following morning, Mr. Warfield walked into the money-lender's office where Zora was behind the desk. He had begun to smile, having quite a fancy for pretty girls, but she cut him short by saying that her father was in the inner room and expecting him.

Then she lowered her gaze to an unromantic day-book and the visitor saw he must be content and go on.

He did go on and was soon in Mr. Lockyard's presence. The money-lender greeted him with a smile and cordial grasp of the hand, and Warfield believed the battle won.

"You see I am on time," he said.

"Yes, sir, and I fully appreciate punctuality and would have been disappointed had you not come," said Father Lockyard, in his genial way.

"The fish is caught!" thought Warfield, exultantly; but, aloud, he said: "I never neglect business."

"I judge not, from what I have seen," said the money-lender, passing over a cigar. "Well, shall we come to business?"

"If you please."

"Very well; I have seen my friend."

"And what does he say?"

"He is favorably impressed. He has fifty thousand dollars he would be pleased to put into a well-paying mine, and such he thinks the Quickstep must be."

"So it is, or rather, so it will be when properly developed by the aid of capital."

"Exactly; he understands all this."

"Well, am I to see him now, or do you act as his agent?"

"For the present I am his agent, but when certain conditions have been complied with he will come to the Bend and see you personally."

"What are the conditions?"

"Well," said Father Lockyard, in his most genial way, "the Quickstep mine must be discovered, the town of Cutaway City must be built, and some information is necessary as to your half of the capital."

Warfield stared blankly.

"I am not sure I understand."

"I say the Quickstep mine must be discovered and the town of Cutaway City built."

"You plunge me deeper than ever in perplexity," muttered Warfield, his mind full of alarm.

"In plain words there is no Cutaway City and no Quickstep mine!"

"What do you mean, sir? Do you accuse me of misrepresentation?" blustered the baffled villain.

"I accuse you of nothing, sir."

"But I say there is a Cutaway City and a Quickstep mine."

"Somewhere, possibly, but the two are not connected in Idaho. There is no Cutaway City there."

"Sir, I say there is."

"In that case you are at liberty to develop its resources. My friend is reluctant to invest in an Aladdin's lamp, but if you have Cutaway City down so fine, there is no reason why you should not become a millionaire from it!"

Lockyard spoke as calmly as ever, but Warfield's soul was filled with bitterness. His carefully laid and nurtured plan had failed, and not only that but he had been played with up to the last moment. He longed to spring on the old man and strangle him, but such things were not safe at Big Nugget Bend.

Various plans for his immediate conduct occurred to him, but he decided to act the justly indignant role and get away as soon as possible. He feared a counter-stroke.

"Sir," said he, "I have to-day been most vilely insulted; I have been stabbed in man's dearest vein—my honor. Words cannot tell you the emotion in my mind; suffice it to say your gray hairs save you from chastisement."

"Unnecessary clemency on your part, sir," interrupted another voice and Allen Sterling walked in. "I am here as the fighting-man of the outfit, and if you really thirst for exercise, here I stand!"

Allen made the announcement pleasantly, and that may have been why Warfield did not sharpen his scalping-knife and go on the war-path; or it may have been that Allen's muscular form had something to do with his reply.

"I am not a bruiser, and I feel myself above noticing you. I wash my hands of you all, and may Big Nugget Bend fare as ill as you have served me!"

With this parting shot he strode from the room, and, passing Zora without a glance, made for the outer air. He looked over his shoulder once, to make sure the muscular clerk was not on his track, and then hastened toward Parrott's hotel.

Ten minutes later he burst into the room where Jack Bunker and Horace Kellogg were seated. The latter was fresh from his duel, and Jack was just out of his night's debauch—but far from being fresh—but they had laid rose-hued plans on the result of their ally's mission.

When he entered the room his face told the story, but not until he sunk into a chair and began cursing furiously did they give up all hope.

It was Bunker who spoke first.

"Save your brimstone an' come ter business. What hez happened?" he asked.

The question brought Warfield back to his feet and he told the story fully, not forgetting to mention all that had been done to annoy him.

He finished with a fresh stream of profanity, in which Kellogg joined, but Jack Bunker leaned his head on his hand and reflected. His mind was not clear, and he was frank enough to confess he had been very drunk the previous night; though, as before said, he had no recollection of the indiscreet talk he had made to Mr. Jones; but he still had more brains than either of his companions.

"What do you make o' this?" he finally asked.

"Make? Why, we don't make anything; we lose the whole infernal business," Warfield answered.

"I reckon we do, but how come ther old man so posted on Cutaway City?"

"Now you have me."

"Ter me it seems simple. Somebody who's wiser than he is hez been knockin' our plan in ther head. Who?"

"Sterling, of course!" cried Kellogg.

"Sartain," said Jack, with a nod. "He's ther cr tter. He hez been around ther West a good bit, an' when ther old man told him o' ther scheme he set right down on't an' tole him thar was no Cutaway City an' no Quickstep mine. Yes, pards, we owe it all ter that same varmint!"

Kellogg clinched his hand, and swore in a subdued key, but Warfield did not answer at once.

"Will you give up the game?" he finally asked.

"That's fur Kellogg ter say."

"And I say, never!"

"Then," said Warfield, "Mr. Allen Sterling must be removed."

"A lump of lead will settle it," muttered Kellogg.

"A lump of lead won't settle it," said Jack, coolly. "You galoots er too hot-headed. I hev a better way."

"What is it?"

"Ef we plant him, you kin make up yer mind ther gun will kick. Ef he disappeared suddint, ther fust man ter be suspected would be one Horace Kellogg, 'cause folks know o' ther quarrel. No, sir—no shootin' while I'm in ther game. Sterling must be got away from ther Bend on some pretext."

"But he will come back."

"Not when I hev put my foot on his head. I reckon ther right way is ter hev him arrested on some charge, an' took ter Denver. Give me a leetle time ter think, an' I'll study it out."

And it did indeed seem as though Bunker could strike the right key if any one could—nature had created him a schemer, and he had always kept in practice.

He did not remain a great while longer with his allies, but took his way to the cabin where he made his home.

A very humble and unpretentious man was Mr. Bunker; and those who saw him smoking his short pipe before his door, knew little of the important schemes running through his mind.

On this occasion he did not smoke outside the door, but went in where he could think undisturbed. He first dipped his head in cold water, for the ache of his over-drinking was not yet all gone, and then sat down beside his table to give his mind full play.

As he sat there, he would have been very much surprised had he known that a pair of sharp eyes were watching him from the loft of the cabin; for his predecessors had been a large family, and a loose flooring had been laid from plate to plate to make an extra room.

There, a man was lying flat on his face, and watching Jack through a crevice.

What was his object? Not robbery, for Jack was clad in rags; not bodily violence, for he could have shot the fellow down at once. What then?

It may be set down as a fact that half the men in our world do not live to show gray hairs without having a past well worth telling. Sometimes, they are anxious to hide that past, and succeed; in other cases, the old drama rises, phoenix like, from its ashes and makes trouble for him who would have kept it forever in its grave.

Perhaps Mr. Jack Bunker was no exception to this rule.

But if the watcher expected to see him do anything strange or compromising, he was not rewarded for his trouble. Jack kept his seat, smoked and meditated as stolidly as though no spy was within fifty miles.

He was sure that Lockyard had nearly swallowed the Quickstep bait, and he did not seriously consider the possibility that the old man might have been warned by another person

than Allen Sterling. All things, he thought, pointed to Allen as the man, and as such a sharp young fellow would be very much in the way of his plot to swindle the money-lender, it followed that he must be removed.

But as Jack sought for the way he saw nothing of the spy above, though the spy saw nothing else save him. The keen, bright eyes were tireless in their watch, and if there had been a betraying word or sign from Jack it would have been noted.

Jack, however, kept his thoughts to himself, and when his face indicated that he had settled his problem, abruptly arose and went out.

Then the spy's eyes disappeared, only to be succeeded by his body, a moment later, as he came down the rud-ladder. And the spy was none other than the briefless lawyer of the Bend, Wisecraft, alias Old Ketchum.

CHAPTER XVIII.

OLD KETCHUM MAKES A CALL.

THE lawyer went no further than the door, for, as he looked out, he saw a crowd of men and, in their center, was one particular man who was just mounting a bowlder.

His object could not be held in doubt when one saw that it was Bartholomew Blake; he was about to make another attempt to show the people of the Bend how wicked they were.

It was clear they anticipated some fun, but Old Ketchum was far from sharing their anticipation. It was all right for Jack Bunker to pass out among them, but it would hardly do for Ketchum; it might lead to unpleasant results.

So the lawyer secretly shook his fist at Blake and wished him miles away.

As there was not much hope that he would go, the prisoner turned to look at the window. The space was not large but he resolved to try it. Resolute squeezing took him through, but when he looked for Bunker he was not to be found.

He had gone straight about his business and Ketchum had lost the desired chance of dogging him.

Convinced that this was so he paused for a moment to hear Deacon Stonefist. He was talking in the old vein and giving the men of the Bend a very unfavorable pen-picture of themselves, but the lawyer soon tired of it and went away.

Returning to his office he found a letter which had just arrived for him. He looked at the postmark and then quickly broke the seal. Evidently it was short, or else he read rapidly, for he soon lowered it and a look of satisfaction crossed his face.

"Good!" he muttered; "the last links in the chain are closing in and I shall soon have my lord, the money-lender, on the hip. His pretense of being a quiet, humble old man of moderate means, as well as this other affair, may be exposed at any time. Proof enough is before me, but just now it does not suit me to make the facts public. I have thrown the old man into a panic already, and I'll not do any more for fear he may flee from here and so defeat all my plans. As for the girl—I wonder who gave her the heathenish name of Zora—I shall not do her any harm so long as she behaves well. Perhaps—"

Here a fly walked into Mr. Wisecraft's ink-bottle, and by the time the invader was driven off the lawyer was too much flushed from his exertions to continue a steady train of thought.

He passed the remainder of the day in his office, but, shortly after dark, took his way to a small house at the outskirts of the town. It was here the Pollacks lived, and here that Althea Lawrence boarded.

Old Ketchum's knock was answered by Betty, who gravely listened while the visitor stated that he wished to see the teacher. The small girl looked him over deliberately. She had discovered that there were some men who were not pleasant associates for her beloved teacher, and she wanted to be sure Wisecraft was all right before she admitted him.

The examination being fairly satisfactory, he was ushered into the main room of the house while Betty went for Althea.

The latter soon entered, a doubtful look on her face, but she started with surprise at sight of the lawyer.

"You here!" she exclaimed.

"Yes, my dear," he said, taking her hand.

"Are you surprised?"

"I did not suppose you would come to see me openly."

"It can do no harm. Everybody here supposes you to be a mere penniless school-teacher, while I am looked upon as a sort of raven, after the style of Poe—a thing of evil. They have facetiously dubbed me 'Old Ketchum,' little suspecting how appropriate the name is. But, by the way, are we free from listeners?"

Althea knew the character of the Pollacks well enough to feel safe in saying there was no danger.

"Then, to business. Have you anything to report?"

"Nothing which bears on our undertaking, though there are several things of another

nature. First, let us speak of business. What have you learned?"

"Enough to know Jack Bunker is our man; enough to know he is here to get Nathan Lockyard's money by any means which will avail him. Already one plot is thwarted; a wild-cat mine scheme. Jack is in dead earnest and bound to duplicate his work at the East. His disguise, however, is perfect, and, beyond a doubt, he might talk face to face with the money-lender and not be suspected."

Althea shivered.

"I cannot tell how I fear him!" she said.

"Nor can I, for I don't fear him at all," Ketchum replied, grimly. "If we knew where the money is I would snap a pair of bracelets on his wrists in a moment and cut his career short."

"And you have gained no clew to the money?"

"Not the slightest. Last night an agent of ours who called his name Jones, managed to get Jack drunk. This, you must understand, was a remarkable thing, for prudence is Jack's ruling passion and the man who gets drunk is a fool. But Jack did it, for once. Then Jones tried to pump him, to use a vulgar expression. Jack stated that he had money, but he could not be induced to say what he did with it to have it safe. He said it was not buried, and that he would not trust a dollar in a bank. Now, the question is, what has he done with it?"

"I don't see how we are to learn," Althea said, with a sigh.

"We must learn. Good gracious, I won't fail!" the old lawyer declared. "In my college days I used to participate in a game called the tug of war, at which my side was never worsted. Well, here we have another tug of war, but in this case it is brain against brain. Are we to admit Jack Bunker is our superior? No! We shall win the game."

His confidence made Althea smile for a moment, but there was so much that was dark, gloomy and tragic about the affair that had sent her to Big Nugget Bend that she could not feel as he did.

Having heard his story she told about the duel between Sterling and Kellogg, with the causes which led to it.

Ketchum nodded several times in rapid succession.

"I like that clerk; he is of good material. And as he is right in Lockyard's office, we may yet have to take him into our confidence."

A peculiar expression crossed Althea's face.

"Perhaps," added the lawyer, "it would be well for you to fascinate him so as to bind him to our interests."

The girl flushed a little.

"You forget my pledge."

"But this is only a pretense. You are not to love him, but to make him your dupe, if I may so bluntly express it."

"Not I!" she exclaimed, "It would be too dishonorable!"

Something in her tone made him look at her sharply.

"Ah! I have a suspicion," he said, quietly. "I don't believe it will be hard to fascinate Mr. Allen Sterling."

Deeper yet became the color on the girl's cheeks, but she rallied with but partially concealed vexation.

"Do not leap to conclusions, sir, and let us speak no more on this subject."

"Just as you say; in fact, I have but little more to say before I go. Hereafter, when you want news, look at our established post-office; I must not visit you too often. But, what shall we say of the girl, Zora?"

"I have not made her acquaintance, as yet."

"I have and, what is more to the point, I have verified my suspicions. Now, the question is shall we make war on her?"

"Haven't we enough to attend to already?"

"We have, for the present, for the tug of war promises to be warm. But we will look to Zora, anon, and if you say so I can bring down the enemy's banner at any time. But, enough for now. I will go and look around a little. Remember the private post-office and don't fail to let me know if there is anything new."

Old Ketchum took his departure and went at once to his office. On his arrival he found an visitor there and with some surprise he recognized Father Lockyard.

"I have been waiting for you," said the money-lender.

"So I see. What is the reason? Do you want to go to law and pay twenty dollars to recover ten?"

"No. I came in regard to the letter you lately delivered to me. It contained information of importance."

"Did it? Well, that's lucky."

"I would like to hear what you know about the Quickstep mine."

"About the what?"

"The Quickstep mine."

"Never heard of it," said Old Ketchum, taking a pinch of snuff.

"Is it possible you don't know the contents of that letter?"

"Sir, it came to me through the mail. In-

side was a second envelope with your name upon it. The envelope was sealed. Do you suppose I opened it?"

The lawyer spoke with considerable warmth.

"I beg your pardon, sir, but from the way in which the letter came I am compelled to believe you wrote it."

Lockyard spoke with firmness, yet as politely as he could. Ketchum looked surprised, then a little angry, but finally laughed grimly.

"Do you suppose I am fool enough to write a letter, and then carry it myself to its recipient? No; I am able to say all I have to tell. I neither wrote the letter nor do I know its contents; I swear it. What was it about?"

"I had nearly fallen into the hands of sharpers, and put money into the so-called Quickstep mine, of Cutaway City, but the letter warned me there was no such mine and no such city. I owe some one a debt of gratitude."

"I'm not the man; don't know A from B about mines. There might be a hundred Quicksteps, and as many Slowsteps, within a mile of here and I know nothing about it. Don't know a smelting-machine from a pile-driver. But, see here; I advise you to shun all speculators. Men like you are liable to be sought by sharpers. Look out for them; keep your house locked; guard your goods and moneys; pray for honest neighbors, and—if you want to go to law, call on me!"

And this was all the information Lockyard gained about the mysterious letter. There was another subject which lay heavily on his mind; one where Old Ketchum did not figure so pleasantly; but the money-lender let it pass for then and went home.

CHAPTER XIX.

THE MEN FROM DENVER.

THE following day two strangers arrived at Big Nugget Bend on the afternoon stage. There was nothing singular about that, for men came and went there with the way peculiar to the land of gold, but these men ultimately showed they had come on business.

That night they put up at Parrott's Hotel, and kept their room all night. Parrott felt a little hurt that they did not appear in his bar-room and show their good clothes, which were of somewhat fashionable cut; but how could he find fault when they ordered a quart of whisky up to their room?

He couldn't and he didn't.

After breakfast the men left the hotel, walked down the street, and entered Lockyard's law-office. As usual, the clerk was on duty at that hour, and, seeing two well-dressed men, he immediately gave his attention to them.

"Good-morning, gentlemen."

"Good-morning. Your name, I believe, is Allen Sterling?" one of them briefly asked.

"Yes."

"Late of Denver?"

"Yes, again."

"We are from Denver; we are officers of law, and have come to arrest you."

"To arrest me?" echoed Allen, greatly surprised.

"Yes."

"On what charge?"

"Embezzlement from the office of Low & Wynmore, where you were employed, if you remember well."

"The idea is absurd," Allen declared. "Why, I have their own recommendation in my pocket, even now."

"Crookedness does not always come to light in a day. Of course, I am not the man to say whether you are guilty, neither am I here to argue with you. I have only to take you to Denver and let you fight it out. As you have plenty of friends there I dare say you will make music in court. Here is my badge of office, and here, my warrant."

The stranger, who spoke with the terseness peculiar to a well-trained detective, exhibited both articles and Allen did not for a moment suspect he was falling into a snare. He believed he saw a genuine officer of the law and knew he must submit.

His captor, as he might now be considered, reminded him that he had but half an hour to prepare for the stage and advised him to improve his time, so Allen called Father Lockyard and explained the situation.

The money-lender was astonished, but not for a moment did he show a doubt of his employee's innocence.

"There is some mistake which will easily be cleared up at the examination," he said. "I will myself go with you to Denver and see you safely through."

"That is not necessary," Sterling answered, quickly. "I have all the friends in Denver that I need—a father, brother and others. Depend upon it, I shall clear myself without trouble."

"But, how about money?"

"We have enough of that."

"It does not seem right for me to desert you now," said Father Lockyard, with all the kindness of his nature.

Sterling, however, again assured him there was no ground for worry, and as the detective reminded them that time was passing he prepared to go. He had little to do, as he decided

not to take any baggage. The road to Denver was not a royal one and the lighter they went the better.

So he had merely to say good-by to Lockyard and Zora—both of whom showed their friendship then—and was ready for the start.

The detectives, who showed considerable kindness, agreed not to put any bonds upon him if he would give his word not to attempt an escape, and no one who saw the three enter the stage had any suspicion that Sterling went as a prisoner.

The journey began drearily enough for the clerk. He was more and more amazed at such a charge from Low & Wynmore, for his association with them had been of the most pleasant nature, and his own work had been done with scrupulous fidelity and honesty.

Embezzlement!

The word had an ugly sound, having been coupled as it had with hundreds of trusted employees through the country. To Allen, it sounded worse than burglary, but he felt confident he could clear himself.

Warren and Yates, the detectives, knew nothing of the case, they said, more than the warrant explained.

So they journeyed on. Twelve miles they had to go by stage, or they might have made it twenty-six, and so struck the railroad; but the detectives had left their horses at Deerhoof Bar, and they intended to strike across the country in another direction.

A late dinner was eaten at the Bar, and then they went on by saddle. Three good horses had been awaiting them, and they made time which was a relief after the slow-moving stage.

Despite his own trouble, Allen found time to think of those he had left behind. Lockyard had never explained more about the Quickstep mine affair than he had heard from the niche where the money-lender concealed him before the interview with Warfield, but he had told Allen to be on his guard, as he feared he had been systematically marked by sharpers who wished to get his money. He was sorry to leave the old man at such a time.

Another affair was on his mind. What of Althea Lawrence? Allen did not attempt to blind his own mind to the fact that he loved the teacher. How far from smoothly ran his suit the reader has already seen, and, of course, this affair would make matters worse.

Was there any hope that she would doubt his guilt?

He could find no affirmative answer. She had always been more ready to think evil than good of him, and he knew how ready was the world in general to turn its back on a person accused.

Lost! lost!

Yes; his last hope seemed gone, and the youthful and fair-judging reader can imagine what that meant to him.

The trio rode some distance in almost utter silence. Allen was busy with his thoughts, and the detectives seemed to have nothing to say. The former had been over the road once before; indeed, it was preferable to the through-stage line, if one had good horses; but it was little used, as people had a passion for striking the railroad as soon as possible.

Having thought until he was thoroughly miserable, it occurred to Allen that his wisest course was to put trouble and forebodings behind him, and be as cheerful as he could. Accordingly, he aroused and began to talk to the detectives.

Yates seemed inclined to reciprocate, and after a little encouragement spoke of his past experience in his business. He had once been located in New York city, he said, and in a modest way told of many an adventure in the metropolis. There was enough to tell, for the city washed by the twin rivers is the home of crime and mystery, and Mr. Yates beguiled the dull hours on the trail by interesting stories.

The trio had been crossing a plain, but just before dark they neared the mountains. Lucky Pass lay before them, and it was a very fair road for a mountainous district.

Near its mouth they paused for supper. It was only a cold repast, but they spent an hour over it and in smoking. The detectives, too, produced a bottle and drank freely, and the liquor loosened their tongues perceptibly. Some people would have thought this unprofessional conduct, but Allen was not surprised.

They resumed their way after the halt and rode straight through the pass. Had there been no moon it would have been dark work, but Luna was up and at her brightest, and where the pass curved properly it was as light as day. Nature was at her fairest; the mountain peaks were tipped with silver; and along the road there was such a peculiar and frequent change from light to darkness, according as the moon's beams did, or did not, fall in their path, that it was almost like a fairy scene.

Perhaps half a mile had been gone over when, as they were talking in their gayest mood, Sterling suddenly checked his horse.

"Wait!" he said. "Are you not going wrong?"

"Going wrong?" repeated Yates.

"Yes. Here is a fork of the pass. I believe we ought to keep to the right."

"So we had if you want to go back to Big Nugget Bend, but to Denver—not. Our road is to the left."

"You may be right, for I have been over the road but once before, but I have a faculty for remembering an object once seen and I could almost swear our way was to the right."

"Don't swear unless you want to commit perjury," laughed Yates. "I know every foot of our way here, as well as I do the streets of Denver. Rest easy, young man, we know our business."

There was a curtness about his last words which made a great change from his previously pleasant manner, and Allen said no more but went on. It was the business of the detectives, not of himself, to find the way to Denver.

As they progressed, however, his suspicion became a certainty. They were off the track and going he knew not where. Every minute the way became rougher until the pass was but a thread, but this did not seem to disturb his companions. They drank frequently, told stories and joked, sung snatches of lawless songs and acted, on the whole, more like bandits than honest men from Denver.

Suddenly a suspicion flashed upon the prisoner. Before he had not had a doubt; now he was sure his companions were not what they pretended. They were not detectives, but villains who had caught him in a net. Everything seemed to go to prove it. He had wondered at his arrest, at the route taken by the men, and by their change of manner. All was now clear; they were not detectives, and he was not arrested; he was simply in a trap.

As this conviction came to him he tried to look the matter fairly in the face. Who were the men and what was their object? Not robbery, surely, for he did not have any money or valuables about him. What then?

It was not hard to find an answer when he remembered a certain recent occurrence at Big Nugget Bend. There had been a plot to rob Lockyard, and he, Allen, had appeared prominently when Warfield was shown that he was foiled. Lockyard had intimated that he feared another attack. What, then, was more likely than that another attack was intended, and that the plotters, believing Allen to be in their way, had adopted this course to get him out of it.

CHAPTER XX.

"PREPARE TO DIE!"

ALLEN had thus far reasoned with commendable clearness, but beyond this point all was vague and indefinite. Granted that he was not arrested, but kidnapped, what did his captors intend to do with him? Had he been taken to this remote and lonely place to be murdered?

At first thought this seemed the only reasonable supposition, but maturer meditation led him to doubt. If they simply intended to kill him it might have been done immediately after leaving the stage.

What then?

Allen looked at the rough way they were traveling, and wondered more than ever. Certainly they would never reach Denver by that route.

If he had possessed a weapon he would have contrived to get his back to a rock and refuse to go further, but, of course, he had been disarmed at Big Nugget Bend.

Nor could he make a dash for liberty. As a precaution he had not before condemned, he had been made to ride between the men's sides in the wider pass and between them in a direct line when it narrowed.

To make a dash was to give the one in the rear an admirable chance to put a bullet through him.

Many a man of boasted bravery would have found himself badly frightened at this situation, but Allen tried to remain calm and weigh every circumstance for what it was worth.

The leading villain went on in a way which indicated perfect familiarity with the route until, turning into a gulch, they finally reached a cabin which nestled under the nose of the rock almost like an eagle's nest.

"Here we stop and take a little sleep," said Yates, sliding from his horse.

"I am glad enough of it," added Sterling, more deliberately following. "I have had enough of traveling for to-day. But, what is this shanty? Not a hotel, I take it?"

"This is a half-way house put up by the Life-Saving Service," said Yates, lying with a recklessness which showed he no longer thought truth necessary. "Travelers are always welcome. You and I will go in, while Warren looks out for the horses."

For a moment Allen's heart leaped, for he believed his chance had come; a chance to attack the men separately; but the second villain dashed his hopes to the ground by saying the horses would take care of themselves.

So the trio entered the cabin together, and Yates promptly found a half-consumed torch and started a light, Warren in the meanwhile

standing at the door so as to give Sterling no chance.

With the light once going, the latter examined the interior of the place. It was guiltless of finishing, but not of certain comforts. There was a bed in one corner, made up largely of bear-skins, and Nature had been drawn upon liberally in other ways to make the dwelling comfortable.

Allen, looking at all with a critical eye, saw plenty of evidence that it was regularly occupied by some one, and knowing that rascals of all kinds were to be found in a radius of fifty miles, he did not doubt but it was an outlaw refuge.

He was directed to a seat, and then his companions went without hesitation to where they found pipes, lighted them, and sat down to smoke.

Allen did not decline the chance they gave him for similar indulgence.

"Kind in the Signal Service to establish such a half-way house, wasn't it?" questioned Yates.

"I never heard of it before," Allen bluntly said.

"Oh, it is not generally known. Only officers of the army, of the law, and the like know of it. It would soon become a home for idle vagabonds if it was made public."

"You have been here before, I judge?"

Both men smiled.

"Two or three times, haven't we, Warren?"

"As much as that," was the reply, and the speaker seemed to see a joke somewhere.

Sterling asked other questions, taking care not to let them see he suspected anything, but as the minutes wore on he became conscious of a strange dullness and sleepiness stealing over him. He did not need an explanation; such a thing was new to him and he quickly suspected that it was caused by the tobacco he was smoking. Some other article had been mixed with it to put him asleep, and the drug was working.

His first impulse was to fling himself upon the men and make a fight for his liberty, but second thought suggested another way. If he was not already hopelessly affected, he might fight off the power of the drug.

For some time he had been yawning, and he now increased his show of sleepiness and scarcely touched the pipe. Yates urged him to smoke more, but he made some vague reply and looked as stupid as he could, though he managed to detect a quick glance between the kidnappers.

"By Jupiter!" he suddenly said, arousing a little, "get me to bed, I'm villainously sleepy. Where's my room?"

He had arisen and, standing unsteadily, looked at Yates with dull eyes.

The latter smiled.

"Our reserved rooms are all taken up," he said, jovially, "but you can camp down anywhere. Don't you see the bed?"

Allen did see it very plainly, but staggered a little in going to it and then dropped heavily on the bear-skin. The mental effort he was making had cleared his head not a little, and he was acting with a zeal few professionals ever used.

For it was not a reputation, but a life, at stake.

"Best bed I've seen for a year!" he muttered, sleepily.

"Real goose-feathers in it, lad," said Yates, laughing.

"I'm no goose," replied Allen, trying to be as foolish as he could and succeeding well.

"He'll get plucked just the same," observed Warren.

"Hush!" ordered Yates.

But Allen had heard the words, and with his suspicions thus strengthened he muttered indistinctly for a few seconds and then, to all appearances, fell asleep.

Silence reigned in the cabin for a while. Allen had settled down in a position where he could watch his companions secretly, and he let no chance pass to weigh them in the balance.

They sat for a while without motion, except as their pipes required, and a frequent turning of their eyes toward Sterling.

"He's asleep," said Warren, at last, in a subdued voice.

"Let us speak in Spanish."

"Very well, but Gabriel's trumpet only can wake him. I know the power of that drug."

"True," said Yates, in Spanish, "but there is nothing like caution. Now, then, we have our man caged and at our mercy. We hold the game in our own hands, and he—well, he is better off than he would have been had we put a bullet through his brain, according to orders."

"The poor fool did not know what a narrow squeeze he had when he objected to our taking the left branch of the pass."

"Why should he? Warfield fixed us out so clever that I almost felt like a genuine detective and was tempted to arrest myself."

"What evidence could you have found to convict yourself?"

There was a break in conversation as the men laughed as though some rare joke had been made; then Yates added:

"But if Sterling had kicked against the devi-

ation from the pass, I'd have sent a bullet through him so quick he wouldn't have known whether the revolver missed fire or not."

"Luckily, he didn't, and here we have him as safe as can be—in the Signal Service cabin. Ha! ha!"

"The next thing is to see what we can make of him. Gid Warfield isn't a man to proceed to extremities without a cause, and this man must either be dangerous to him or in the way of some of Gid's schemes."

"Of course."

"Gid is a fool to trust us," said Yates, taking a drink of whisky. "You are the only man in the world I trust. Now, then, we shut up our man and you guard him while I go back to the Bend in disguise and get onto Gid's game. You still agree to it?"

"Yes, of course. But, see here; suppose you find we can't make a dollar off of Warfield. What of this fellow?"

He pointed to Sterling.

"In that case we will obey orders and shoot him. Lacking a way to better our condition, I believe in honor among thieves."

The reader may be able to imagine the emotions with which Allen listened to this conversation. All his suspicions were confirmed, and he saw that he was among men who would shed his blood without scruple.

It was plain, too, that he had been decoyed away to give Lockyard's enemies a better chance. The kidnappers had mentioned Warfield, and he was the man who had been the agent of the fictitious Quickstep mine. Evidently a gigantic plot was on foot or the schemers would not have gone so far as to arrange for the death of Lockyard's clerk.

All the resolution of Allen's nature arose to meet his enemies. He lacked the impassiveness of long life amid such scenes, but he had the next best thing; ready wit and bravery had been his birthright.

How was he to outwit, or defeat, his captors?

This question he rapidly considered from every point, while still keeping up his pretense of slumber and sharply, but secretly, watching them. They had said he was to be shut up and left in care of Warren while Yates went back to Big Nugget Bend. In that case, of course he would be bound, or in some way made helpless.

Plainly, he must strike for freedom while he could, even though he fought two men. He looked covetously at the revolvers lying on the table.

As though in keeping with his thoughts, Warren suggested that they at once bind their prisoner before he could awake. There was wisdom in the idea, of course, and they arose. Yates produced a stout cord.

Sterling saw the crisis at hand. He prepared for work. He resolved to make a dash for the revolvers and use them freely. His head was clear and he reasoned well. The man approached and he made an effort to arise.

An effort, only. His limbs were like lead and he could not gain his feet; the power of the drug was on them if not on his brain.

"Curse him!" cried Yates, "he has played 'possum and overheard all. Shoot him!" And even as he spoke he sprang forward and clapped his revolver to Allen's head, a murderous light in his eyes.

"Prepare to die!" he furiously added.

CHAPTER XXI.

A WELL-RECOMMENDED YOUNG MAN.

ON the morning of Allen's departure from Big Nugget Bend, Mr. Wisecraft, alias Old Ketchum, made a late breakfast. He was just swallowing the last of it when a white paper shot through the open window, sailed past the old lawyer's nose and fell on the floor at the further side of the room.

He looked at it sharply enough to see it was in the form of a letter and then, instead of picking it up, ran to the window and looked out. Only one person was visible near at hand; Bartholomew Blake was walking down the street with his infallible head high in the air and his infallible heels covering ground with a steady stride.

Evidently Old Ketchum did not think it necessary to run around the house to look for the mysterious postman, so he returned, picked up the letter and read it.

What he saw there made him exclaim, aloud: "Great Pompey! what next? The tug of war grows warm! Greek has met Greek and it strikes me the upper dog has the best of the grapple. By George! this must be attended to right away!"

He clapped on his hat and was about hurrying out when he suddenly paused.

"This won't do! I am hot and excited, and if I rushed over in this way I might reveal all. So, steady, Old Ketchum; put on a sexton like look!"

And he obeyed his own injunctions so well that when he crossed the street his parchment-like face expressed about as much as a side of leather.

He went straight to Father Lockyard's office and found Zora behind the desk. She looked at

him belligerently, for she had not forgotten that his first visit had in some way worried the money-lender.

"Good-morning, my dear," said Old Ketchum, his mind all on business. "I would like to see Mr. Lockyard."

"I am not so sure he wants to see you," she retorted.

"Be so kind as to ask, anyway."

Zora paused to deliberately arrange her papers, and the lawyer still absent-minded, added:

"Will you make haste, my dear?"

"My name is Miss Lockyard and I will trouble you to remember the fact. As for the expression, 'my dear,' you need not use it again to me. You are too familiar!"

The look of utter astonishment on Old Ketchum's face rather embarrassed Zora. She had taken a strong dislike to him and was willing he should know it, but she was conscious of having overstepped the bounds of politeness and her really kind heart, at once reproached her.

But the lawyer, after one look of surprise, became like a machine in his strong politeness.

"Miss Lockyard, can I see Mr. Lockyard?" he asked.

"You will find him in the inner-room; walk in," she replied, hardly knowing whether to laugh or otherwise.

Old Ketchum obeyed. The money-lender had been reading, but his paper had been laid aside and he looked grave and anxious. The visitor greeted him and then came down to business without much loss of time.

"I understand your clerk was arrested this morning."

"Yes," Lockyard admitted.

"What do you think of it?"

"Think? I'll stake anything he is innocent," was the warm reply.

"Um! Well, I have just had a letter thrown into my office which I wish you to read," and with these words Ketchum passed the mysterious missive over.

This is what Lockyard read:

"LAWYER WISECRAFT:—Young Sterling has just been arrested by men claiming to be Denver detectives on a charge claimed to be embezzlement in Denver. In my opinion the whole matter is a falsehood and a plot. I do not believe the men were detectives, but I do think the affair off the same piece with the Quickstep mine swindle. Some one wants Sterling out of the way. I advise you to see Lockyard and convey this suspicion to him, but above all bid him be cautious. Another plot is surely planned against him. Tell him to doubt the loyalty of his left hand to his right, but to pretend to be without suspicion, and if he sees evidence of a trap, to pretend to walk into it and then let you know so the plotters may be foiled. In this, fail not!"

"B. A."

Finishing this singular letter, Lockyard raised his eyes and looked at the lawyer.

"What does this mean?" he asked.

"You know as well as I do."

"I do not know as well as you. Sir, you wrote this letter, yourself!"

"Pardon me; I did not."

"Then it was written by your dictation."

"Pardon me; it was not."

"At least you know the author of these ideas."

The money-lender tapped the letter with his finger.

"I will not deny that I suspect, but if I am right it was one who is your friend. It is known to me that you have enemies who, at the very least, seek to deprive you of your fortune. I say 'fortune,' because I am aware that you inherited a large sum of money from your uncle, Mr. Knott, who recently died at an advanced age. Well, sir, such a fortune is a tempting bait for sharpers and they are after you. Witness, the Quickstep mine affair. They had it cut and dried to scoop in fifty thousand dollars, there, but timely warning saved you. Now, your correspondent suspects another plot; he thinks the arrest of Sterling but a scheme to get him out of the way; and once more you are warned in time."

Old Ketchum said all this rapidly and his parchment-like face showed a fresher color than usual. But the money-lender looked at him thoughtfully and the suspicion came to him that the man before him might be the chief of his enemies—a wolf in sheep's dress.

"There is too much mystery about this to please me, sir," he replied. "Who are you who knows so much about me and my affairs?"

"I'm one in the tug of war," Ketchum grimly replied.

"Answer to the point," Lockyard said, irritably.

"My dear sir, I cannot agree to give my history; let it suffice that I knew your uncle, W. N. Knott, and your late brother, William; also that you was left the legacy I mentioned. Now, I do not profess any great love for you, but I will swear I am not your enemy; and I wish to see your enemies baffled."

"Without expecting a fee?"

"Mr. Lockyard, if you want to go to law, call on me if you will; but in this matter, not a cent of your money will I touch. Understand me, too; I am not going to mix with your af-

fairs. I pass along the warning; save yourself or not, just as you please."

The money-lender leaned back in his chair, a sort of hopeless look on his face.

"I am deep in the shadow of mystery; you give me no light as a guide; I have already seen one plot, and know I am menaced; but now you refuse to confide in me, and I am like a rudderless boat."

"To tell you all," replied the lawyer, "would be to betray secrets I have no right to unfold; I should become criminally to blame if I did. My advice to you is to guard your fortune; further than that I have nothing to do. But the writer of this note asks that if you see evidence of a plot you will lead the plotters on, and catch them in their own net."

"One question: is the writer of this note the same as the one who warned me in regard to the Quickstep mine?"

"Probably they are one."

"Don't you know?"

"Probably they are one," was the impassive reply.

Before more could be said Zora rapped at the door, and then entering, announced a gentleman, a stranger, to see her father. The latter bade her admit him, and Ketchum held a paper before his face and pretended to read.

Lockyard had a presentiment that something of importance was about to occur, and mentally compared his companion to a vulture brooding over him.

Without much delay a young man entered; a very neat, respectable young man; one whom a casual observer would feel sure he could pin his faith upon; but, evidently, just a little too slender and young for Western life.

But he spoke bravely, addressing Lockyard, and told how he had come from Denver to Big Nugget Bend to get the benefit of country air; adding that he had been sent by Lockyard's friend, Mr. Halpine, who had given him a recommendation, and said that, perhaps, Lockyard could give him a situation. Would Mr. Lockyard read his recommendations?

The latter readily agreed. A man recommended by Halpine must surely be all right, and it occurred to the money-lender he might use the young man in the place left vacant, temporarily or permanently, by Allen Sterling.

He read the recommendations.

Mr. Halpine spoke in warm terms of the bearer, Joshua Bennett, and two other business men of Denver appended their names—at least, they were there.

As Lockyard raised his eyes from the recommendation he chanced to encounter the gaze of Old Ketchum. The latter held his paper so that Bennett could not see his face, but he had clearly been trying to get the money-lender's attention. And when he did so the elder man was astonished by the fire which blazed in Ketchum's eyes.

"Take him!"

The lawyer's lips framed the two words, and then a suspicion flashed upon Lockyard. The recommendation was a forgery, and Bennett was a tool of his enemies!

With this idea in his mind the money-lender had hard work to avoid betraying himself, but he rallied and did surprisingly well. He told the young man he believed he could give him a position in his own office, and if he would call again in the evening he would give him a definite answer.

Bennett was very grateful; at least, he said he was; and he went away with the highly respectable air so well-recommended a young man should carry.

Then Lockyard turned to the lawyer.

"Well?" he questioned.

"Your correspondent has argued well; Sterling was removed for a fixed purpose, and this smooth-spoken young hound is a traitor!"

CHAPTER XXII.

DEACON STONEFIST ADDS HIS VOICE.

PREPARED as he was for the announcement, Lockyard could not avoid a start.

"Explain yourself," he said.

"This young man, I repeat, is a traitor, or, rather, he will be one if you give him a chance. He is the agent of your enemies. Sterling was decoyed away to make a vacancy so they could introduce one of their tools, and, lo! he is here. Those recommendations are but forgeries. The object is to get Bennett in and then to rob you."

"But you advised me to engage him; at least, your lips framed the words, 'Take him!'"

"So they did. Do you remember the advice of your unknown correspondent to seem to fall into a trap whenever one became visible, and then unmask the plotters?"

"And you advise me to do this?"

"I do."

Father Lockyard sat confused and uncertain. He was no longer a young man, and matters were going in a way so at variance with the placid life he had led for many years that he felt about as cheerful as though he had been ordered to leap upon an Express-train running at full speed.

Not so the lawyer. The matter was in exact keeping with his nature, and he was never in better humor. Had he been in Lockyard's position he would have enjoyed carrying out the counter-trap to the end.

At that moment the money-lender would have given all his year's gainings to have had Allen Sterling to consult with upon the subject. A clear and honest head was needed to help him out.

While he hesitated an angry voice in the outer room led him to open the door.

Birchholomew Blake stood in front of the desk, his stern eyes fixed upon Zora, and his merciless tongue running in the old channel.

"If you will take advice from one older and wiser than you, you will cast aside the vain ribbons from your neck and hair, and appear like a true woman. Vanity and love of finery are woman's besetting sins."

"Vanity!" cried Zora. "And who has just bragged about their wisdom? 'Older and wiser' than I am! Perhaps you are, but you don't show the fact, and if it ain't vanity to brag of it I don't know the meaning of the word!"

"Thoughtless girl! What will your wayward tongue—"

"Oh! never mind my tongue. I was resting it when you came in, and if we both do that it will be wisdom, I think. I've got tired of your lectures, Deacon Stonefist, and I advise you to change your business. We need a first-class barber at the Bend, very much, and though I shouldn't want your hands on my throat, you will probably do well."

Black as a thunder-cloud, to use the old expression, became the face of the reformer, but at that moment Father Lockyard's benevolent face appeared like a gleam of sunshine amid a storm.

"Child! child!" he said, with gentle reproof, "do not use such language."

"It's the English I was taught, and if there was any poor grammar I overlooked it. Now, then," and here she waved her hands wildly over a pile of papers, "I am busy, and I'll thank everybody to stand back and let me breathe. I can't talk and work, and I won't try. Arrange the picnic as you wish, but leave me alone—do!"

Deacon Stonefist's face lost its usual expression of severity to give place to one of horror. Evidently, in all his experience with the wickedness of the world he had never seen anything quite equal to this.

He looked at Zora a moment in silence, his face speaking volumes, and then turned to Father Lockyard.

"I wish to see you for a moment alone, sir," he said, his manner gloomy and ominous.

The money-lender seemed to think this the best way to end the difficulty, and led the way to the inner room.

Deacon Stonefist bowed coldly to the lawyer, but refrained from any remark. It seemed as though his power of handling people without gloves was for the time taken away by his late experience—there is a difference between bombarding and being bombarded.

"I wished to see you privately," said he; "but—"

"Consider me a post, or something of the sort," Old Ketchum interrupted; "I will hear nothing."

"You may speak freely," added Lockyard, convinced that the crank of the Bend could have nothing of importance to say.

"Very well, sir. I wished to refer to the young man I saw leave your office just now. The circumstances of the case lead me to think you have intimate relations with him. I am surprised at the fact, sir."

"Why so?"

"Because he is wedded to evil ways, and it is an old saying that birds of a feather flock together."

The reformer was recovering his usual weight.

Mr. Lockyard laughed slightly and then grew grave.

"You speak of this young man as though you knew him well."

"And don't I know him well?" Blake severely demanded.

"You should know that best; but if you do, I wish you would tell me what you know."

"I know this: he was at one time a decoy, so called, of infamous men in New York city, who used him to help rob unwary people with less brains than money."

The Deacon spoke more bluntly than usual, and Father Lockyard only kept Ketchum from coming in explosively by a quick gesture.

"Yet," said he, "that young man has just applied to me for a situation, and presented recommendations of good character."

"From whom?"

"Honorable business men of Denver."

Blake looked the money lender straight in the face with his steel-like eyes for a moment before replying.

"Are you sure they are genuine recommendations?"

Old Ketchum wheeled around and spoke quickly:

"That's what we want to know."

"We?"

"Yes: for I am interested. You say you know this young man well. Now, make no mistake, but let us know all."

Blake replied without much of his usual wildness. He said the man's name was unknown to him, for in New York he had been called "Bowery Fred." He was a sort of dandy blackleg in those days—not so very long before—and the ring with which he was connected derived great benefit from his highly respectable looks and manner.

At any other time Lockyard might have received such a statement from Blake with a degree of doubt, for his mental condition rendered all uncertain, but as he had but added to previous suspicion it made a great difference.

Ketchum, in particular, was much interested and nodded several times in succession.

"Would you be willing to confront this man and make your charges?" Lockyard asked.

"Would I? I shall make the charge to his face, and in the open street, in less than an hour," the Deacon sternly said. "Such men should not be allowed—"

"Pardon me," interrupted Lockyard, "but I have another plan. I believe Bennett, as we will call him, to be engaged in another scheme, and that, too, one leveled against me. Will you aid me to entrap him in the act?"

"No! I will warn him in time so that he may not add another crime to his long list," Blake declared.

Old Ketchum took him by the sleeve.

"Now, hold on, Deacon, hold on! Catch hold of this case before you go too fast. We are having a grand tug of war and we must not—nay, we *will* not lose. Our cause is a just one and it is your duty to uphold it, while as for Bennett, I reckon he's a gone coon—excuse my force—anyhow, and one more crime won't count."

The old lawyer spoke eloquently, but it took more than this to win the day. Blake was at first stubborn, and old Ketchum worked himself almost into a fever, but he knew how to move the public and he converted Deacon Stonefist.

In the end, the latter not only joined the majority but offered his aid. He had been told that the other men suspected a robbery was contemplated, and he was anxious to "crush the iniquitous plot," as he expressed it.

And so it was decided that young Mr. Bennett should be admitted to the money-lender's house—and watched.

Blake and Ketchum left the house separately, so as to give no hint to a possible watcher. The former, going first, did not speak to Zora but directed a most freezing glance toward her. It was lost, however, for she did not raise her head.

Ketchum waited a little, and the money-lender was anxious he should. He had some doubts whether Blake was sufficiently sane to be trusted, but the lawyer decided that he was.

"Deranged he certainly is, but there is a method in his madness and I am not sure but we have secured a really valuable ally."

After Ketchum was gone it became necessary to take Zora into his confidence, and this her father did, fully, except that he did not mention that one subject which she believed was worrying him.

The girl was surprised, but she rallied with the quickness of her nature. Her first thought was of Allen Sterling, and she presented the probability that he was in great danger, if he had been taken away by men not officers of law, so strongly that Lockyard lost what composure he had left.

Then, coming to the plot proper, she denounced her father's plan soundly. She had confidence in neither Blake nor Ketchum and was of the opinion *they* were the leaders of the plot and that the so-called plan to trap Bennett was but an artifice to get him into the house to work for them.

Her vigorous onslaught completely demoralized the money-lender and he turned the key of the outer door and went to bed. There was something laughable about all this, but Lockyard did not feel like laughing. After his placid life it was a severe turn of the tide which threw him into plots, counterplots and mysteries at his time of life.

The tug of war might be all right for younger, bolder heads, but he did not like it.

CHAPTER XXIII.

KELLOGG COMES TO GRIEF.

WHEN Lockyard recovered his wits a little he saw several new points to be considered in the counterplot, and, disregarding Zora's advice that they pack their goods and get away from Big Nugget Bend as soon as possible, he went over to see the lawyer.

The office door was locked, and a singular tramping about followed his knock, but after some delay the key was turned and a voice bade him enter. He went in and found Ketchum industriously washing his face, his back turned to the door.

"Sit down, Lockyard," he said, through the suds. "I'll be able to talk coherently in a moment. Anything new?"

The visitor explained why he had called, while Ketchum scrubbed away at his face as though it was the office floor instead.

The lull gave Lockyard a chance to look about, and thus it was that he chanced to see an old and battered hat lying in a chair; a hat very different from the one the lawyer usually wore and more suitable for a very dilapidated tramp. Mr. Lockyard was not a very observing man, but he was struck by the idea that hats and heads usually go together; and that, as there was a strange hat in the office, there must be a strange man there also.

He looked under the table and behind the chairs, but no man was visible. But, at one side, was a small door, as of a closet, and he was convinced that Ketchum had hurried a man in there to get him out of sight; hence, the tramping he had heard.

All this was suspicious and he decided that he was not being fairly dealt with; that Zora was right when she formed the opinion that the lawyer was in the plot to rob them.

He looked at Wisecraft. He still stood by the basin scrubbing his face, and Lockyard wondered he did not go through the skin. He used some liquid from a bottle, too, which was as little understood.

Lockyard formed a resolution, and when his companion turned, his face red and glowing, his cheerful remark that he was ready for business was blighted by an early frost.

"I am not sure I have any business to transact," the money-lender coldly said.

"Eh?"

"Mr. Wisecraft, you are not dealing fairly with me."

"The dickens I'm not! What do you mean?"

"Simply that I refuse to talk here while you have a man shut up in your closet!"

"A man in my closet!" echoed Ketchum.

"There is no man there."

"Then how do you account for that hat?"

Father Lockyard spoke very sternly for him and pointed to the disreputable looking head-covering with an accusing finger.

Ketchum looked a little at a loss for a moment and then laughed aloud.

"Oh! that was left here by a drunken miner who called to secure my services to compel Parrott to furnish him liquor on credit. When I told him it couldn't be done he became angry, dashed down his hat and left. I'm keeping the sombrero for him. I'll convince you there is no man in the closet. Come!"

He led the way and, somewhat ashamed, Father Lockyard followed, looked and saw nothing but clothing, apologized for his erroneous suspicion and put all doubt behind.

The two sat down to talk. It was agreed that Bennett should begin work at once, and that watch should be kept over the office every night. If a burglary was to be committed it would be done very soon—before word could come from Denver that the so-called arrest of Sterling was a sham.

So it was arranged that, the next night, the two men should remain awake and watch for burglarious symptoms.

Some time was devoted to talking about Sterling, for they agreed that his life was probably in peril—or already lost—but Wisecraft said he had already put a capable man on the trail of the kidnappers and they could do no more.

And then the money-lender returned to his office, as his new clerk-elect would soon call for his answer.

No sooner was he gone than Ketchum pitched the battered hat into the closet.

"Narrow escape, that," he muttered, "and the old man was sharp enough to draw conclusions; but I reckon he does not suspect anything now."

That afternoon Althea Lawrence closed her school, and all the pupils went out except Betty Pollack. Then in walked another person, and Horace Kellogg stood before her, his hat off, and an assumption of politeness over all, but with traces of a less pleasant spirit lurking around his mouth and eyes.

"Good-evening, Miss Lawrence," he said.

Althea was too much astonished to answer in any way except mechanically.

"Good-evening, sir."

"I called around to ask if you've heard the news."

"I don't know that I have," she coldly replied.

"Young Sterling is arrested."

Althea started, giving ample proof that the information was not received with indifference, and then she turned on the fellow with a dangerous light in her eyes.

"Upon your charge, sir?"

"Unfortunately, no. I say unfortunately, because what I know of him would not keep him shut up a great while. But the real cause—ah! that's more serious!"

He waited for her to question him, but she would not satisfy him enough for that and he had to resume.

"Officers from Denver arrested him this morning. It seems he was employed in some sort of a bank there and the firm has just dis-

covered that he appropriated their funds while with them. In all probability it is a ten years' affair; ten years behind the bars!"

Kellogg spoke with a show of forbearance, but he could not hide his joy and low satisfaction. His hated rival was out of the way, he was breaking the news to the woman they both aspired to win, and it was a triumph just suited to his nature.

But Althea gave no sign that it was evil news to her. Perhaps she did not care. At any rate, she did not doubt but Sterling had been arrested, but her calm face expressed no sorrow and she made no reply.

Kellogg waited in vain for her to say something, and her composed manner, as she put on her hat, robbed him of half his triumph.

"You take it coolly," he said, seeing she was going to say nothing.

"How would you have me act! Of course, I am sorry for the young man. If he is guilty, I pity his weakness; if he is innocent, I pity his misfortune."

"This is a burlesque to blind my eyes," Kellogg hotly exclaimed. "Deny it as you may, I know Sterling is your lover!"

"Sir," said the teacher, her steady face flushing, "there is a limit to my forbearance. I have borne a good deal from you; more than I shall bear in addition. Had I a brother, you would not dare insult me; were I a man, you would insult me but once!"

She faced him then, standing proudly erect, and her lofty scorn touched even his hardened nature—not with remorse, for he was past that; but with a shame which was forced upon him.

He mumbled something indistinct and his eyes fell before hers, but Betty Pollack could hold her peace no longer.

"Say the word, teacher, an' I'll go fur my old man; he'll wallop him fur you, jest as easy as nothin'!"

It was an unlucky speech. Kellogg raised his head with even a more dangerous light in his eyes.

"If any one wants to try it, let them come on!" he cried. "As for you, my lady, your airs are high and mighty, but I don't care a picayune for them and I swear to bring your haughty head low before I am through with you!"

The threat had scarcely passed his lips when another footstep than theirs sounded on the floor and they turned to see Bartholomew Blake. His gaze was fixed upon Kellogg and, if possible, his expression was more severe than usual.

"In this degenerate age," he said, at once, giving each word a clear and deliberate pronunciation, "crime follows wherever man goes and man is but little better than the brute. You, sir, seem to have surpassed your fellows in the art of ruffianism. You have insulted a woman, and though I know little to her credit your conduct is base and unmanly; more than that, it is such that only an apology can make it right. Down on your knees, sir, and ask for pardon!"

Steady as the ticking of a clock and like lumps of ice fell the words from Deacon Stonefist's lips, while his steel-like eyes looked into Kellogg's and, though passionless, seemed to pierce him like a keen anger boring through and through.

Kellogg felt like one with the nightmare, but he would not yield while Althea stood before him.

"I'll see you in perdition, first!" he retorted.

"Miserable wretch, you but add to your fault. Apologize!"

Cold and calm as ever fell the words, but Kellogg lost all prudence. Clinching his fist he struck out for Blake's face—struck, and nothing more.

Blake scarcely moved his body at first, but somehow Kellogg's wrist fell into his white, slender hand, and was stopped as though caught in a vise; then, with a second motion, he bore the fellow to his knees, and held him with a strength against which struggling was useless.

"Once more," said Deacon Stonefist, without a ripple of excitement, "apologize!"

Kellogg was white as snow; never was man more torn and buffeted by passion—a fury of anger for which there seemed to be no fitting term—and yet his voice was but a husky whisper as he replied:

"Never!"

Then Blake raised him to a level with his shoulders, seeming to find the weight but a trifle, and dashed him prostrate to the floor.

Betty Pollack uttered a whoop of satisfaction, but Althea was very pale and trembled violently. Twice she unclosed her lips to speak, but not a word did she utter.

But the spell was broken and she gave a cry of alarm as Kellogg bounded to his feet, his eyes blazing, and, snatching a revolver from an inner pocket, he presented it to Blake's head with a hissing cry:

"Die, you crazy hound, die!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

THE DEACON'S VICTORY—NEWS FROM STERLING.

THERE was reason for Althea to cry out, if she had a human regard for her champion, for murder was in Horace Kellogg's heart. And

for a moment Blake's life seemed hovering between the two worlds, but the fatal shot was not made.

The Deacon's hand shot upward with a speed and force which proved his right to the sobriquet, "Stonefist," and then the revolver went flying across the room. Almost in the same breath Blake took his enemy by the arms, just below his shoulders, and held him in the old vise like hold.

Kellogg gave up the struggle after a little and stood conquered, if not subdued. Blake looked him squarely in the face, his gray eyes as calm as ever, his strong face as immovable. But under the grasp of his long, sinewy hands it seemed to the prisoner his very bones were giving away.

"Misguided man!" said Blake, "it were better for you that blindness had come to your eyes than that this deed be recorded against you!"

Not a word for himself, not a trace of anger; only the same rigid teaching Big Nugget Bend knew by heart.

It seemed as though even a crank might be unswervingly true to his purpose.

And Kellogg, whose fierce wrath nothing could cool, no longer had a thought of violence. Mixed with wonder and awe at such immense strength, he felt that the man was insane, and not accountable for what he did. Such being the case, he was glad to let the matter drop.

"I am conquered," he said, trying to speak with good grace. "You have the strength of ten men in your arms; let me go, and I swear not to lift my hand against you. As for the young lady, I apologize for what I have said and done."

It was a bitter necessity, but he felt sure Stonefist would not deviate one particular from his stand, and it was better to have it over.

"Go!" said Bartholomew Blake, "and when you are in a better mood, think calmly of this."

Horace brushed a little of the dust from his garments, thrust the revolver in his pocket, and went out.

Blake was alone with Althea except for Betty's presence.

"Merciful heaven! he will kill you for this!" exclaimed Althea, brokenly.

Deacon Stonefist turned to her with a shadow of surprise in his cold gray eyes.

"We are all creatures of the dust," he said, steadily. "Men and women, in their pride, forget that; I trust I am in this respect above the average person. If this man kills me, such is my fate; if it is not so decreed, I am safe from him. I am surprised at your selfish fears, woman. Give your pity to the evil man who needs it; I am not of such base clay as he!"

It seemed a pity that his splendid achievement should so soon be hedged in by clouds of harshness and egotism; but of such clay—base or otherwise—was the crank of Big Nugget Bend.

"This seems to me a moment for human feeling," said Althea, gravely.

"Unless human feeling be above the average, there should be no moment for it. Forget this scene, for are you not of the same nature as Kellogg? And, besides, women are deep in the muddy waters of pride and vanity."

There was no kindly light in the eyes which met her own, and Althea sighed deeply.

She would gladly have had it different; she felt grateful to the man who had become her champion; but he was like the bitter cold which turns water to ice. Pity him she must, as we do all whose minds are darkened, but the feeling could only be indulged in secret.

Little more was said between them, for Althea was already expected at Ben Pollack's. Blake went out first, and seeing that Kellogg had really gone, went toward the heart of the village, his long hair floating in the wind.

"I'm 'fraider o' him than I am o' Kellogg," said Betty, clinging to her teacher's hand.

Althea started.

"His ways are very odd, I admit, though I do not believe he would do any one harm."

"Father says you can't gamble on a crank," the small girl lucidly observed.

Althea smiled but did not reply, and, hand in hand, teacher and pupil walked home.

Horace Kellogg went straight to Jack Bunker's cabin and flung himself down in a chair with a sound half-sigh and half-groan.

"Hello!" said Jack, "who's been a-hittin' Billy Paterson, now?"

"Bunker, I'm about ready to throw up the sponge."

"Never do that while you kin see outer one eye an' hev any back teeth left. What's up?"

"I was fool enough to call at the school-house and tell Miss Lawrence that Sterling was arrested."

"Wal?"

"Well, she irritated me, as usual, and I—"

"Wal?" repeated Bunker, with some eagerness. And another pair of ears listened as anxiously, while two keen eyes looked down from the floor above; the eyes of Old Ketchum, the lawyer.

"I made a fool of myself and was talking rather hard to her," added Horace, "when in walked our city crank, Deacon Stonefist."

"An old friend o' mine," said Jack, grimly. "Wal?"

"Spare me the particulars; to use the current term, he wiped up the floor with me!"

Bunker laid back in his chair and laughed for at least three minutes in a way which made the table shake. He had seen something of Blake's muscle, himself, but had forced himself to swallow the unpleasant dose because the man was deranged. He thoroughly enjoyed Kellogg's discomfiture, however, and was willing he should know it.

They talked for some time on the subject, while Ketchum impatiently waited for them to speak on more important subjects. He was running a good deal of risk by his spying, but he had a resolute nature and was thoroughly in earnest about his "tug of war."

"I suppose," said Horace, "you think me a fool to run after Miss Lawrence?"

"Wal, I dunno," replied Bunker, giving the matter careful thought. "You might be, an' then, ag'in, you mightn't. I don't want to say positively."

"Perhaps it is madness, but I shall have some hope when I know Sterling is dead."

"Begin ter hope right away, then, fur yer kin feel ez safe ez though you'd see'd his grave-stone. Warfield has fixed that so it won't break an' before now Sterling is buzzards' meat."

Ketchum shivered at the cold heartlessness of the assertion.

"But if the men should fail to do their work?"

"They won't fail. They are of a kind that don't weaken on sech jobs; Warfield knows 'em. Sterling has taken ther last degree an' dropped inter ther past tense."

"I'll bet he returns just in time to knock over the new scheme with my worthy uncle."

"I'll bet he don't. We're in ter win this time."

"At this rate all my money will be used up in getting it," growled Kellogg. "When I have paid you and Warfield and all the small fry, what shall I have left?"

"At least fifty thousand dollars."

"Sometimes, Jack, I doubt you," said Kellogg, suddenly.

"Ther blazes you do!"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Bunker was looking almost belligerent at his ally.

"Are you sure you are sailing under your true colors?"

"Bless yer boots, my detective pard, how you do git right down ter bed-rock! What d'ye suspect?"

"That you are neither uneducated nor rough, if the truth is known; that you are my equal in the art of speech if you but show yourself as you are."

Bunker laughed grimly.

"You're on ther wrong road, boyee. I only wish you war right. I hev a head fur plannin' an' ef I was educated I'd be a millionaire ter short order."

"Again, how does it happen you know as much about my uncle as I do myself?"

"All chance, same ez 'twas when the owl got around ther chicken-roost. Tell ye what it is, Kell, ther spoils draw ther men o' brains. An' you see I've studied up Nate Lockyard's case."

Horace did not answer, but, resting his head on his hand, looked gloomily out of the window. Now and then, since uniting his fortunes with those of Jack Bunker, he had remembered that he was only a figure-head for the plans of his more audacious and quick-witted ally. Bunker was doing the work, and, now and then, he had fears that he might manage to get away with the Lockyard money.

If he had known how near he came to the truth that night; if he could have known just who and what Jack Bunker was, he would never have co-operated further in the scheme to rob the money-lender.

Bunker watched him closely, but with little fear of open revolt. He had spanned the mind of his dupe and knew just where he held him, and as he watched there was nothing new to alarm him.

The arch-villain's pipe died out, and when he looked in his pocket for tobacco there was none there.

"Never mind," he said, "thar is enough upstairs an' I'll fill ther larder. Jest hold ther light at ther foot o' ther stairs."

This seemed a trifling matter, but to Old Ketchum it was anything else. Bunker was about to ascend to his hiding place, and there was ground to fear discovery. He did not know where the tobacco was kept and he might hide—for hide he must—exactly where the rough would go.

Still, there was no help for it, and with as much caution as possible the spy crept back to the shadow of a box and laid down at the further side.

What to do in case of discovery he did not know, but it was best to be guided by Bunker's actions. Ketchum was no coward, but ten thousand dollars would not have hired him to willingly face discovery then. If Bunker once

discovered he was being spied upon, certain plans then moving against him would very likely go to ruin and the tug of war be irrevocably lost.

And Bunker came steadily up the ladder.

CHAPTER XXV.

THE MIDNIGHT WATCH.

OLD KETCHUM bugged the side of the box closely and peered out for the first sign of Bunker. His bushy head arose to a level with the floor and his bushy body followed.

"Now, then," he said, bending down toward Kellogg, "give me ther light!"

The spy experienced a thrill of alarm. With the lamp on the upper floor he was in great danger of discovery. True, he might escape a casual search, but anything systematic would surely reveal him. He ardently hoped Bunker would attend strictly to business.

The fellow took the lamp and moved along the floor. He looked burly and ominous, but personal fear was unknown to the old lawyer. True, Bunker could worst him in an encounter, but that was a small matter.

Ketchum feared most to have the plotters know they had been watched. A good deal of trouble had been taken to get Jack in the net, to win the tug of war, but one great thing was lacking and discovery would frighten off the arch-villain.

Jack came straight toward the sheltering box and a series of wild schemes ran through Ketchum's head. Which should he adopt? He decided to adopt neither until absolutely forced to do it.

The big ruffian rolled unsuspectingly along and then set the lamp down on Ketchum's box. It was on the extreme edge and no light fell upon the lawyer, but he began to feel as warm as though the lamp was a gigantic furnace.

It was like a reprieve, however, when Jack gave his attention to another box beside the larger one. He looked for a moment and then muttered:

"Nailed up!"

Then he turned and went to the ladder.

"Hi! throw up the hammer, Kell!" he called to his accomplice.

The spy decided that he had better get away from the point of danger. He thought quickly and acted in the same way. Arising silently as possible, he bent forward and deliberately blew out the light. Then with all possible care he turned to gain a safer part of the chamber.

Two steps he had taken when the boards gave way beneath him—he made a vain attempt to save himself, throwing out his hands frantically—but a heavy object, which, even then, he surmised was the box, came thumping down against his back and he stopped not, neither stayed he.

As he went through the floor, he saw in the dim light the form of Kellogg just below him, his face upturned in bewilderment, and then man met man and both met the floor.

In plainer words, Ketchum dropped squarely upon Horace's head, knocking him down and falling upon him, while, just a second later, there was a tremendous crash as the box struck the floor.

The lawyer had received no injury in the accident, and he was on his feet in a moment. Quick-witted as ever, he saw that Kellogg did not stir, and with a noiseless step he made for the outer door, opened it, and was practically safe.

He paused for a moment, however, to see the result.

The voice of Bunker speedily arose.

"Hello, thar! What in perdition hez broke loose? I say, Kell, hez ther ruff 'umbled in?"

There was no reply, and then Ketchum heard Jack coming down the ladder.

"I say, Kellogg!"

Still there was no answer, and, with an oath, Jack went back to the upper floor. He wanted the lamp, but failed to find it, and he came so near falling into the opening in the floor that he was set in motion again, and his profanity was remarkable.

He wanted a light, and none was to be found.

There is no knowing what would have been the result, but Kellogg's voice arose feebly and Jack descended again.

The lesser villain had been knocked senseless for a brief space of time, but he was now in motion, and in moving he accidentally found the lamp.

A light was soon going, and the pair looked the scene over. Ketchum waited anxiously to learn if he had been seen, but there was no evidence to that effect. They laid all the blame to the loose floor, and supposed it was the box which had knocked Kellogg down.

All this angered them, but was very satisfactory to the lawyer, and convinced that danger was averted, he returned to his own home.

The following day a new clerk was at Lockyard's desk. The well-recommended young man from Denver had been duly engaged, and it was remarkable what an air of respectability he gave the place.

The money-lender remained with him for a few hours, and then Mr. Bennett found himself alone. But this made no change in his con-

duct, he did not show any disposition to meddle with things not his to care for, and Lockyard, looking down from the small opening made to watch the new clerk, could certainly find no fault so far.

Bennett's first experience alone with a customer came out in this wise:

Nearly every one at the Bend knew a successor to Allen Sterling was on duty, and when Daddy Clover learned the glad tidings, he was filled with a zealous longing to meet the young man.

He entered the office with a free-and-easy manner, his battered hat perched buoyantly on one side of his head, and immediately put out his hand to the clerk.

"Good-mornin', dear friend—good-mornin'. I hev come further triffin' loan you promised, an'— Hello! 'tain't my ole friend, Al Sterling!"

Mr. Clover started back with a tragic air of surprise.

"I beg ten thousand pardons, sir, fur my mistake. I thought 'twas Al—a man who knew just how good my word was, an' never refused a loan. An' he never lost one on me—I say it proudly, sir—he never lost one. Honor, sir, is my cardinal principle. Kin you tell me where Al is keepin' hisself now?"

"He has left the office, and I am his successor," tersely replied Bennett, not at all overcome by Clover's eloquence.

"You are—you?" cried Daddy. "Wal, I swear, you do fill ther chair o' state, don't yet. An' allow me fur ter say, I am right glad on't. I like yer face an' don't hesitate ter say so. You'n me, will be high ole cronies. I'm in hyar every mornin'; take out ten dollars an' pay it back at dark—a peculiarity o' mine. See? Wal, I'm just a leetle pushed fur time, ter-day, an' I'll take ther ten an' jog along."

"All right," said Bennett, coolly.

"En?"

"I said, all right."

"So I thought," replied Clover, "an' I said I'd take ten dollars an' jog along."

"Well, why the blazes don't you jog?"

"Because I hain't got ther ten," said the old man, with a ghostly grin.

"Well, you won't get it here."

"Eh?"

"See here, you old whisky-barrel, I've seen such men as you before. We raise them where I came from just as cattle and sheep are raised in Colorado, and they are all branded on the nose with the ten-spot of hearts, same as you are. Now, you never borrowed a dollar here and you never will. Put your best foot forward and get out of this!"

Daddy Clover stood with cold horror pictured on his face, his eyes expanded and one arm outstretched like a pump-handle.

"This ter me!" he exclaimed. "An' darest thou then ter beard ther lion in his den, ther Clover in his hall? My hot blood awakes at this hyar insult!"

"Go outside and cool it then."

Daddy Clover's arm fell. He sighed deeply and his chin dropped to his breast.

"An' has it come ter this? I am a poor ole man, a King Lear in a cold world. Young man, be not hard with one around whose rock-bound castle ther rough winds o' winter are blowin', but ef yer can't give me ten dollars, make it ten cents."

"That's quite a come-down, but it won't work in this court. Go outside and dust off your hat!"

Bennett spoke with Bowery briskness and Daddy Clover knew he had found his Waterloo. Without another word, with only a deep sigh, he turned and went away.

His little experiment had failed.

The new clerk had opened well, and there could be no doubt but he was shrewd enough for the position. The only danger was that he was too shrewd.

The day passed without events of importance, but the prolonged absence of Allen Sterling, coupled with Jack Bunker's assertion that measures had been taken to have him put out of the way, left little room to hope for his ultimate return. His faithfulness to Lockyard had undoubtedly cost him his life and the lonely trail would keep the secret—keep it, because the man sent out by his friends had failed to gain any clew.

As night approached Father Lockyard became so nervous that there was danger Bennett would observe it and suspect the cause, but plot and counterplot were so new to the money-lender that he could not control himself.

Zora, however, came to the front and carried matters along so victoriously that her father's mood was not seen, and, if the truth be told, young Bennett was so dazzled by her loveliness and brilliant ways that he would have turned traitor to the men who put him there had he deemed it feasible.

At the usual hour the office was closed, and shortly after it seemed as though all had gone to bed and that the field was open for burglarious work.

Bennett, at least, had no suspicion. He believed the money-lender and his daughter had retired as usual, little suspecting that from the

upper room Lockyard and Ketchum watched the office and waited for the plotters to begin their work.

What would the night bring forth?

CHAPTER XXVI.

DANGER'S COMPANIONS.

ALLEN STERLING found himself at the mercy of his enemies when he hoped to carry the war into their own camp and save himself by a bold effort. As his head grew clearer he had supposed the power of the drug was passing away, and it had never occurred to him that it had settled elsewhere.

But, as we have seen, when he attempted to leap from the couch he found his limbs like lead, and he sunk back, to be speedily menaced by Yates's revolver.

There was murder in the fellow's heart then, and murder's light was reflected on his face, and had Allen's arms been in the same condition as his limbs he would never have seen another day.

But the numbness was only upon his legs, and just as the ruffian was about to press the trigger he threw up his hands and seized the revolver, turning it from the dangerous bead on his head.

A moment later and Warren too grasped the would-be murderer.

"Hold on!" he exclaimed. "Don't spoil all our plans by such infernal folly!"

"But he has heard all!" replied Yates, hesitatingly.

"What of that? Since we intend to shut him up, anyway, what difference does it make to us?"

Yates wrenched his revolver from Allen's grasp by a quick effort and put it in his pocket.

"Have your own way," he replied, "but if you live to be sorry for this, don't blame me. The fellow has pretended to be laid out when he was as clear-headed as we are, and such a man is dangerous. Look out for him, I say!"

Warren turned to Allen, who had taken the time he could not better employ and used it in thought.

"Get up!" he ordered.

"Unfortunately, I can't do it," Allen replied. "If I could, you would not now have me so completely in your power. You saw me attempt to rise and fail? Very well; the reason is that my limbs were like lead—the work of your accursed drug, I suppose."

Yates laughed.

"Yes, and if you had smoked enough you would be like lead from top to toe. Well, since you're awake, we will bind you and give you time for thought."

"Men," said Allen, earnestly, "let me say a few words before you go further. Let me ask you to reconsider your plans and release me. You have been led astray by those that hate me, but it seems you have no great love for them. Such being the case, release me and I will pay what you hope to get from Warfield. By doing this I swear you shall never lose anything, and you will be arrayed on the side of justice."

Both men laughed at once.

"That would be something new, startling and strange for us," Warren observed. "According to the papers of the State, we and justice don't hitch horses."

"Shut up!" said Yates, angrily. "Don't let your tongue run too fast. As for you, young man, we must decline your offer. Your first step, if set at liberty, would be to put the officers on our track."

"I swear I will not," Sterling earnestly replied. "You shall not be punished, but rewarded by a gift of money. Look you, I claim to be a man of my word, and I say this shall be done; but the way of paying you the money may be so arranged we cannot trap you, if we would, and—"

"That's enough; hold right up. We won't join any man who claims to be such an angel. Since we are in the game we will run it to suit ourselves. Get the strings, partner!"

Warren approached with cords in his hands. Sterling's eyes flashed, but what could he do? Unable to move his lower limbs, and without a weapon, either man might have overpowered him. Such being the case, he resolved to submit without further words and held out his hands in a way which made the men regard him suspiciously.

They found that no trick lurked behind it, however, and he was duly bound.

Then the men went to the further side of the room to consult.

Sterling knew that his future depended largely on that conversation, and watched with keen interest. Perhaps the men might repent having spared his life, and return to do the work Warfield had hired them to do.

The young man would probably meet death as calmly as any one would under such circumstances; but he had no desire to cut loose from life, least of all in such a way.

But the conference did not end as he feared; when the men had finished they returned to the table, sat down and smoked quietly, saying but little.

Then, after locking once more to his bonds, they lay down to rest.

An hour passed. The men were asleep. The natural condition was returning to Allen's legs, and he began to try his bonds. If he could but get his hands free he had the will and the way to effectually turn the tables on his captors.

Long and earnestly he labored, twisting and straining until the cuticle was raised from his wrists, but he might have spared his pains. The bonds had been put on to stay, and they stayed.

He ceased after awhile, and lay looking at his companions. Who and what were they? Desperate men, certainly, though they were sufficiently educated to use good language, but none the less undesirable companions. The mountain cabin was, beyond a doubt, their home. It certainly was not a Government station. And as train-robbers and stage-robbers were to be found in Colorado, he believed they must be of that class.

From this subject he fell to thinking of Lockyard, and the peril that menaced him. Plainly, Warfield was resolved to have the old man's money, and he feared he would be able to get it in some way.

Still thinking, the prisoner dropped asleep. It was daylight when he awoke. Yates and Warren were moving about the cabin, and he soon discovered that the former was preparing to depart. Sterling lay motionless and watched through half-closed eyes.

Yates put on his outer garments, and then looked at the prisoner.

"Don't allow him to escape," he said. "I believe we can make a goodly raise out of this game. I wish Mortimer was with us."

"Why? Warren questioned. "A half will suit me better than a third."

"That's true enough, but there is no getting around the fact that our worthy ally has a long head."

"Well, I reckon we are long-headed enough for this work. I'll trust you for that. Besides, where is Mortimer? 'He came like a simoom; he vanished like the wind,' or something of the sort. Our worthy ally is a will-o'-the-wisp."

"But a man wonderful in his way and true as steel. There isn't another like him in the United States. Well, hang on to this fellow, for my life would not be worth a pleasure if he got back to Big Nugget Bend and found me there."

"I'll hold him like a burr; never fear."

After a few more words the two men went out. Allen soon heard the sound of a horse's footsteps and then Warren returned alone.

He sat down by the table and began to smoke, but, so deeply did he fall into thought, his pipe soon went out and left him still thinking. Allen kept quiet, resolved to let him have it out, but the man finally arose, came to his side and shook him by the shoulder.

"Open your eyes!" he ordered. "I suppose you want a breakfast and you must take it while it's on the board."

The prisoner aroused, yawned a few times and then ate heartily of the breakfast given him. He was fed like a child, but he knew the folly of asking a greater favor.

Warren was in good humor, and when the breakfast had been cleared away fell to talking from choice. He seemed anxious to tell of his exploits, and, taking no pains to conceal the fact that he was a law-breaker, told several wild adventures, giving no names, which confirmed Sterling's previous impression.

Beyond much doubt, the fellow and his partner had robbed many a train and stage.

In these adventures a third party often figured, and Allen was not troubled to connect him with the mysterious "Mortimer" before mentioned.

By and by Warren grew uneasy and finally proposed a game of cards. Allen did not see how he was to play with his hands bound, but the outlaw soon bridged the chasm.

He arranged a board which tipped toward Allen and away from him, and on this the prisoner's cards were placed. He directed his companion what cards to play for him, by number, and several games were thus played.

It was rather comical, at first sight, but Warren was in earnest and Allen hoped to so win his good will that he would ultimately free him.

The day passed in this way, and Warren, at least, was in the best of spirits.

Toward night Sterling ventured to make another appeal for freedom.

"Now, see here, this isn't right," said Warren, in an injured way. "Haven't I used you well?"

"As a prisoner, you have, but—"

"Can't consider you in any other light. My partner believes in me; he has tried me before; he knows me to be an honest and upright man. What would he say to come home and find the fire gone out and his partner gone to parts unknown? I never turned traitor in my life!"

So earnestly did the fellow speak, Allen felt almost like a criminal for tempting him, but with a life at stake he could not afford to let any false notions get into his head.

He presented the case from his point of view.

"Can't do it," said Warren, firmly. "I'd like to oblige you, and all that sort of thing, but I must maintain my reputation as a gentleman; I really must."

"Money, Mr. Warren—"

"Don't speak of it! Money has no charms for me. Nothing will swerve me from the path of duty. A gentleman I was born and a gentleman I will remain. Don't try to tempt me again—don't! You hurt my feelings and do yourself no good!"

And this very moral outlaw went back to his seat by the table.

CHAPTER XXVII.

WARREN PROVES HIS HONESTY.

STERLING let the matter drop. He was convinced that argument was in vain, not because Warren was above temptation, but because he believed Yates was going to make money out of the game at a smaller risk than it would be to let loose the man they had abducted.

And when Yates returned, if he said kill the prisoner, the moral outlaw would cheerfully cut his throat.

The prisoner, however, was not so hopeless as before. By some oversight Warren had neglected to take away the knife with which he fed him, and Allen had worked it around behind him on the bear-robe and in close proximity to his bonds.

By means of this he hoped to regain his liberty.

It was an ordinary table-knife, but long usage had worn it thin and sharp, and patience and time might enable him to wear away his bonds. A good deal of time was, however, necessary, for he must handle it in an awkward way.

He began at once and soon brought it down to work on the cords.

Then began a long and anxious attempt, during which he had always to watch Warren that no unlucky movement should be observed.

But the moral outlaw did not show any great degree of watchfulness. He had settled down at the table and fallen into thought deeper than ever, and one would have imagined to see him that the fate of nations was at stake.

Sterling wondered what was on his mind. Clearly he was not trying to decide whether to release his prisoner, for his mood had been on him all day, and he had firmly refused to liberate him. What then was it?

Anon a look of determination came to the fellow's face, and Allen knew he had decided on something.

He turned his head so quickly that Allen had barely time to close his eyes. Warren looked at him closely, and then pronounced his name.

He did not stir.

Again his name was spoken, but he remained silent.

"He's asleep," muttered Warren.

He then arose, hesitated, sat down again and fell into thought. It lasted but a short time, and then he again arose.

"I'll do it," he muttered.

Do what? Allen asked the question of himself anxiously, as Warren took up a spade. Did he intend to brain him?

Evidently not, for the fellow laid a pick beside it, and then produced a bull's-eye lantern from a box. This he lighted, and then took up the entire outfit, glanced again at Sterling and left the cabin.

What did he intend to do?

The question interested the prisoner less than what he should himself do. He lost no time before trying to do something. Warren might at any time return; his life might be at stake. So he used the knife with rapidity and energy. One unlucky slash cut deep into his hand, but he did not heed it. He sawed away at the cords with all possible vigor.

Thus attacked they could not very long hold together, and Allen felt like cheering when they gave way. Hurrah! his hands were free.

With this point gained, it was a short task to liberate his feet. He was entirely free at last.

He gained his feet, listened, and then went to the door. There was no sign of Warren. He next looked for weapons, but none of the ordinary kind could be found. That there were some about the place he felt sure, but he dared not delay in the cabin.

Accordingly he took a stout stick, which seemed to have been used as a staff, and went outside. Night, dark and silent, was around him. The towering peaks of the range were but little darker than the somber sky.

The way was now clear for him to get away from the cabin, but he disliked to go without a horse. Many a w-ary mile lay between him and any town, and it was a journey he did not care to undertake on foot. He remembered the horses on which he and his companions had come to the mountain, and did not doubt but two of them were still somewhere in the vicinity. But where?

In the darkness he was unable to get any clew, so he tried the next best way and began to search, taking care not to run upon Warren.

The search was not a long one, for in a miniature gulch he found a building set up against the side of the rock, which formed a half of it, and the stamp of a horse's foot was plainly audible inside.

He felt triumphant, but as he looked for and found the door, a gleam of light inside arrested his attention.

Warren was there.

The fact did not change his purpose, and though his first thought was to wait until he came out, his curiosity was so great that he resolved to know what the fellow was doing.

He pushed the door cautiously open.

No one was visible; but the lantern sat on a pile of earth in the middle of the stable, and, a moment later, a small quantity of the soil shot upward from somewhere and dropped on the rest.

Sterling needed no explanation; the outlaw was digging a hole in the ground for some purpose. What was that purpose? Sterling's first thought was that it was intended for a grave for him, and he felt a little chill, despite the fact that he was free.

His coolness quickly returned, and with it came a resolution to see the moral outlaw at closer quarters. In case of discovery, prompt action with his staff might enable him to win the battle.

Cautiously he passed through, and the regular upheaval of earth showed that Warren was digging unsuspecting of his proximity.

He worked round to one side, and gained a position where he could watch more safely. The outlaw was working so rapidly that the perspiration stood on his face, but Allen could not understand it. Of course he was not laboring without an object, but the object was not plain.

The coveted horses stood in their stalls, but paid no attention to outside matters. And Warren dug on steadily.

Sterling was tempted to attack him, but thinking better of the matter, settled down to await the end.

At last Warren seemed to strike some obstacle or something of the sort. He worked more carefully and seemed to be digging around something. And then he finally cast his spade aside, stooped and lifted some small object, and holding fast to it, climbed out of the hole. He sat it down on the level ground, and Allen saw that it was a small box of tin, or something of the kind.

"Aha!" muttered Warren, "you thought you were very sharp, my sly partner, but I have you on the hip. What have you buried here? Clearly, no small treasure, or you would not have done the work so well. But I'll soon know; I'll teach you to play tricks. Honor among thieves is my motto, and I'll have my due like the honest man I am!"

He finished by chuckling, and it was not hard for Sterling to understand the case. Beyond much doubt, Yates had not been so true to the bond of villainy as he should be, and, securing a goodly sum, had buried it thus, only to be overseen by Warren.

His meditations of the day were thus explained; he had been trying to decide whether to let the treasure alone or steal it.

"It's locked," resumed Warren, after bending over the box. "To get it I must break it open, and that stroke cuts me off forever from him. Shall I force it open or not?"

He looked at the wall with a face that was like a panorama. Greed, uncertainty, and, it may be, not a little fear, were there expressed, but the thirst for gold is one of man's ruling passions.

"I'll do it!" he muttered.

Once resolved, he acted promptly. Two strokes with his pick served to break the lock, and the cover of the box flew back. A bundle was visible inside which showed only oil-cloth, and so small a bundle at that as to make Allen, who was looking as eagerly as Warren, wonder what there was of value within.

The outlaw hurriedly removed the package and unrolled the outer covering. Others followed, and the package grew smaller, but he did not pause. At last nothing remained in his hands but a little package of papers.

These, however, caused him to utter a subdued shout, and Allen, leaning forward, saw the papers were bank-notes, and on the outer he saw the figures "500."

Five hundred dollars! If all were of that sort, an independent fortune lay in Warren's hands.

The fellow uttered a muffled cry, more like that of a wild beast than a human being. He burst the package and his fingers flashed in and out among the precious papers. More than one like the first was there; the sum total was simply immense.

He counted it, his face aflame with joy.

"A fortune! a fortune!" he exclaimed. "Ha! I am a rich man; it is mine, all mine! A murrain on the knave who would have kept it to himself! He has sown, and I have reaped. Ay, and no man shall share my profits; I'll take it and go East. But, wait, he will search for me like a bloodhound. He may find and kill me. No, he shall not; I will wait here till he re-

turns, and shoot him dead! Ay, for such a fortune as this I'll do anything. Were he ten times my partner I'd kill him. Kill! kill! kill!—anything for this!"

He handled the money, and his wild joy acted like a spur on Sterling. It would be folly, too, to assert that the latter was calm. He saw before him a fortune; the proceeds of a robbery; the possession of a robber. The chance to gain it himself, without stooping to dishonor, ran riot in his mind, and he lost his head for a moment.

It seemed like a dream afterward, and he had but a dim recollection of how he stole upon the wretch, stood over him for a moment with flashing eyes and upraised club—and then struck home.

The next thing he remembered, Warren lay senseless beside him, and he was handling the money as the other man had done, running the crisp bank-notes through his fingers, and counting the immense sum before him. To the victor belong the spoils, and he had won a fortune by striking the outlaw down.

His blood soon cooled, and he turned to look at Warren. He would have felt genuine repentance had he killed the man for his ill-gotten wealth; but Warren was better than a dozen dead men. He had received a heavy blow, but a thick skull had stood him in good use, and he would be himself again in less than an hour.

Perceiving this, he resolved to get away from the cabin while he could.

Leaving the box, but making a roll of the notes and putting them in his pocket, he then led out both horses and prepared to depart. He would have taken but one, but he knew Warren, with his knowledge of the country, would perhaps be able to overtake him if he left horse-flesh for him to use.

His weapons, too, Allen took away, and then he went outside, mounted one horse, and leading the other, rode away.

The night was dark and gloomy, but with his weapons safe at hand he felt no fear, nor did he anticipate trouble in finding the road. And so he set his face toward Big Nugget Bend, and rode on steadily.

Let us precede him.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE ROBBERS AT WORK.

THE house of the money-lender was dark and silent. Not a sound was to be heard and no light was visible. Seemingly, the entire household was wrapped in slumber.

Appearances, however, are deceptive, as we believe some one has remarked before. And in the chamber selected for that purpose, Lockyard and Lawyer Wisecraft kept watch for the expected burglars. By means of a window at one side they expected to see the house-breakers advance; by means of a cunningly contrived hole in the floor they expected to see what they would do when once in the office.

Old Ketchum should have been a detective by profession. He had taken delight in arranging this trap for the burglars, and though the watch was long and dismal for Lockyard, the lawyer did not lose his abundant animal spirits at any time.

By twelve o'clock the streets became deserted. To all appearances the last honest man had gone to his home.

It was an hour later when Ketchum uttered a subdued exclamation and touched his companion on the arm. The night was dark, as it had been on the mountain where Allen Sterling regained his liberty, but Lockyard managed to distinguish several forms outside the house.

"The crisis is at hand!" Ketchum coolly said.

The money-lender was seized with a trembling he could not overcome, but he watched the men outside unceasingly.

The rattle of a stone against glass was soon heard and then Bennett's window went up. Ketchum nudged his companion; his assertions in the case were being proved.

Next, the interlopers came around to the front of the house and it needed no prophet to tell what would occur after that. Several minutes of silence followed, but only the money-lender was impatient.

Ketchum had applied his ear to the opening which led to the office and he soon heard soft footsteps. They approached the door, the heavy bar was removed and the way clear for the other men. Bennett was true to them.

Then the door opened and all came in.

The lawyer was in high glee. The burglars had come straight on, unsuspecting of the trap laid for them, and they would soon be shown how they had been over-reached.

Ketchum only regretted then that he had not made arrangements for honest men to be there and seize them, but the great uncertainty as to when they would come had rendered this infeasible.

The door was secured again by the interlopers and a match struck. By this a lantern was lighted and Ketchum saw the intruders in detail.

Bennett was there, and so were three other men, but the last appeared to be strangers. Unless they were disguised, he had never seen one

of them. But he knew they were disguised, and believed he could pick out each one despite their pains at making-up.

"Is ther coast clear?" asked a muffled voice.

"All serene, my lord," Bennett flippantly answered.

"An' they are all asleep?"

"Reckon they are; I haven't heard a peep for three hours."

"Well, hev you gained any information?"

"I've kept my eyes open," said Bennett, "but I reckon the bulk of the gold is in the inner office. There isn't over ten dollars in the money-drawer; but in the inner office, as I said before, I smell a mice. There is a stout chest there—a sort of backwoods safe; and as it is easily cracked, I reckon it's worth the try-ing."

"Let's be after it, then," said an impatient voice, which Lockyard plainly recognized as that of his nephew. "We don't want to be fooling around here all night."

"Go slow," said the muffled voice. "I've been in a right smart lot o' tech ventur's, an' I tell ye, slow an' sure does ther business."

"That's Bowery style," said Bennett, with the air of a veteran housebreaker.

Kellogg uttered a curse, and, perhaps, registered a vow to be something more than a fifth wheel when the money was in his hands—poor fool—but said no more and followed at the heels of his companions.

When they entered the inner office, Ketchum and Father Lockyard deserted their post and silently descended, reaching the outer air by another way. There they had been told by Bartholomew Blake they might expect him, but he was not to be seen.

"Now," said Ketchum, quickly, "do you run for help. I'll stay here to watch, and we will have the whole gang in our hands in just about five minutes."

Lockyard heard and started to obey, but he had gone but a few rods, and not quite to the house he was first to visit, when he heard a great clatter behind him. What it was he had no trouble in surmising, and he comprehended that it would alarm the robbers; so he turned and ran back.

And what of the robbers?

They reached the inner office without trouble, and found the chest Bennett suspected contained fifty thousand dollars or more. They had the tools to open it, and three of the four knew how to use them, and two attacked the lock, while one of the others held the lantern.

It was but a short time when a sharp click announced that the bolt had shot back; but just as they were congratulating themselves on the fact, the supposed money-safe turned into a music-box, and a tune (?) rung out which slightly resembled the sound of a cracked drum.

The stout robber uttered an oath and wheeled about. He knew the plot had failed, and his only desire was to get out of the place without being seized and recognized.

He had three willing followers and the quartette rushed headlong through the office. The bar was thrown away and out they went. The stout robber saw a human form near at hand and promptly discharged his revolver. The unknown fell and the robbers fled down the street.

They did not pause until a safe distance had been placed between them and danger, and when they did it was seen that they numbered but three.

"What's Bennett?" demanded the stout man.

"Somebody seized him!" shivered Horace Kellogg, "and I think it was Deacon Stonefist. Oh! Jack, we're in a pickle now!"

"Stonefist!" said Jack, with a scowl; "what's that galoot got ter do with this matter? Durn his bide! he'll find a lump o' lead athwart his deck one o' these fine days."

"This is no time for empty words," said Warfield, nervously. "I'm going to get back to the hotel."

"Go, ef you're skeered," said Bunker, viciously, "but I don't keer a cuss fur all Big Nugget Bend. What I do want to know, how's- ever, is how ther flends all our plans get knocked out so. I never see'd ther like on't. Big an' little, they fail when they should succeed. Now, I tell ye Lockyard's folks knowed we war comin'. Ther man I popped over was a-layin' fur us—I made him lay fur himself. Now, then, who is ther galoot that's playin' his keards against us?"

Bunker was in dead earnest, but neither of his allies would stop then to consider the matter. They were thoroughly alarmed and anxious to reach their burrows, so away they went. But the leading plotter did not forget the suspicion which was in his mind.

"Thar is somebody playin' keards dead against me. Who? Ther Lord only knows. Kin it be Blake? Kin it be he bez brains enough ter do this an' do it so well? Bah! this is nonsense; he was only on ther scene by chance. But I must keep an eye out; ther enemy is wal awake, though I stake my life Jack Bunker ain't suspected."

And the fellow went to his cabin.

In the meanwhile, Lockyard, returning to the

office as before described, saw Old Ketchum slowly regaining his feet, but at one side two other men were standing and he recognized one as Bartholomew Blake.

The second person seemed to be his prisoner, and as Lockyard looked closer he recognized his well-recommended clerk, young Bennett.

"No!" Blake was saying, severely. "This is a case where the law must take its course. I cannot let you go free. I have talked to the men of the Bend about their sins and talked in vain, and it is time to make an example."

"I'll give you a hundred dollars to release me," panted Bennett, who had tried the Deacon's muscle to his satisfaction—or want of satisfaction.

"We're not speculating now," said Old Ketchum, crossly. "One of your partners saw fit to give me a bullet, and only a thick skull saved me. Perhaps your neck is strong enough to save you. Take him inside!"

They went and found Zora already striking a light. When this was done Ketchum's wound was cared for. He had, indeed, had a narrow escape, and blood flowed freely from his wound, but it was not one he need worry about.

During this lull in events Blake kept his hold on the prisoner, but the latter had relapsed into sullen silence and would not answer a word. He was put through the usual list of ways adopted to make men "talk," but threats and persuasions were alike received.

"Just as you say," said the lawyer, with a sniff, "but you will live to be sorry. If you would make a clean breast of it you would find your future a good deal smoother-shod."

Bennett, however, was not to be moved from his adopted stand. He had been educated to the belief that it was unmanly to give information in regard to accomplices, and as soon as he had time to think he became as stubborn as a mule.

Strangely enough, Ketchum was pleased at this. If Bennett confessed, his accomplices would naturally be arrested or driven out of town, and the old lawyer had his reasons for wanting Jack Bunker to have his liberty a little while longer.

A net was drawing around the chief plotter, and those who stood by it did not care to have him entrapped before the proper time.

Little did Lockyard suspect Ketchum had carefully arranged matters so that the chief thieves could escape.

The disturbance had not been sufficient to arouse any of the neighbors, and it was agreed that Bennett should be kept in the house until morning. Blake went his way, after telling the prisoner where his wickedness would probably lead him to, and the house of the money-lender assumed its old aspect.

But the well recommended clerk from Denver was in the toils.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE MAN FROM RED HORSE.

THE previous day, just before dark, a man arrived at Big Nugget Bend and put up at Parrott's Hotel. He looked like a typical rough, but he paid in advance, and Parrott would not have cared if he had been a dozen roughs in one.

He registered, in a sprawling hand, as "Dick Doyle, from Red Horse."

The following morning Mr. Doyle arose at an early hour and put on his clothes—and something more. By saying this we refer to a wig and false beard, without which Mr. Doyle stood revealed as Yates, of the mountain pair.

"Now, then," he muttered, "having squared up the account with nature by means of a good sleep, I'll go and look after neighbor Warfield. Warren will hold young Sterling prisoner, and I will discover what our man is driving at, and try to get in for a share of the plunder. Think I'll walk over to old Lockyard's, first of all, and see what they're doing without their worthy clerk. Let me see—where's my Dick Doyle dialect? 'Gents, I'm all ther way from Red Horse, an' I'm a cyclone come down ter play ther lamb—ef you don't tread on me. Ef you do, I'm a man that must hev a cadaver afore breakfast ev'ry day. That's me—Dick Doyle!'"

Mr. Yates laughed lightly, and having arranged himself so that he looked the character he essayed to fill, went down to the bar-room. As luck would have it, Gideon Warfield entered at the opposite door at the same time.

Parrott saw his well-dressed guest, but overlooked the man from Red Horse.

"Good-morning, Mr. Warfield, how do you, sir, and what will you take? My treat, you know. Heard the news?"

"No."

Warfield leaned one elbow on the bar and held up the glass of liquor so he could look through it. Dick Doyle sat down by the stove, lit his pipe and watched him secretly.

"We had an attempted robbery last night. Several villains broke into Lockyard's loan office and tried to go through it."

Dick Doyle could not avoid a start, but Warfield did not betray emotion by so much as the moving of a finger.

"I trust they were foiled," he said, calmly.

"They were. A burglar-alarm aroused the house and one of the villains was caught."

"Then the others will soon be found."

"I don't know about that. The man they have won't open his mouth to say a word, ay, yes or no; and if he holds to his grip the others may go scot free."

Warfield breathed freer; but Dick Doyle smiled grimly from behind a cloud of smoke. He was willing to swear he could name another of the criminals if circumstances ever made it to his interest.

Parrott told the story of the robbery, as near as he knew it, and Dick Doyle, at least, heard with interest.

"Strange that robbers should molest the old man," said Warfield. "He is not worth plucking, really, is he?"

"No. He lacks a good deal of being a rich man, and his loans to the boys never exceed twenty-five dollars. It is a shame he should be molested!"

"That's so," said Warfield; and he lit a cigar and went out.

Yates, alias Dick Doyle, smiled grimly and followed as soon as was prudent.

There was quite an excitement in the village, and everybody wanted a view of the prisoner. He had been confined in a cabin and placed in charge of trusty men, and there it was understood he was to remain for trial. The name of Judge Lynch had been mentioned as a fit person to preside, but Father Lockyard voted this idea down very promptly.

He would not listen to suggestions of violence.

Doyle managed to arrive at the prison-cabin at the same time Warfield did. The latter did not suspect the rough-looking fellow from Red Horse was his late ally, and he went to the place to face Big Nugget Bend, as it were.

But Doyle felt sure there would be important looks, if not signals, between him and the prisoner, and he resolved to see them. He did not know other men were there for the same purpose.

Warfield walked coolly in, smoking his cigar, and faced his less fortunate confederate in crime. Bennett had been given a pipe and was smoking it with a coolness learned in the Bowery, and no one had seen him waver, but he never ceased to search the crowd for his allies.

Just in front of him Warfield paused and looked at him as curiously as though he had been a museum wonder. Bennett did not cease smoking, nor look at his visitor directly, but he knew very well he was there.

And so did Dick Doyle. He was watching the two like a cat. His patience was rewarded, for by-and-by he began to detect motions. They were mostly made by Warfield, and though rather vague, were interpreted by Doyle to be an injunction to the prisoner to keep up his spirits and reveal nothing, and before a great while he would be released.

Warfield went outside and Doyle followed. They were just in time for another sensation.

The man sent by Sterling's friends to pain news of him had come in and brought a horse with him. He was explaining to Lockyard what he had learned.

"This hyar hoss was found loose nigh Deerhoof Bar. It is one o' ther three stabled there by ther self-styled Denver detectives while they come on hyar by stage. By one means or other ther hoss came back ter Deerhoof, an' all I want is one man ter help me foller up ther trail an' I'll know more about it. I'll now call your attention to one fact. This hoss is black, you see. Wal, on this shoulder you see a brown stain. That ain't nat'ral color, pard; it's a stain o' blood!"

A murmur ran through the crowd and Lockyard changed color. The words were very significant and he needed no further suggestion of Sterling's probable fate.

Dick Doyle, too, stared blankly at the animal. It was, indeed, the animal the last speaker had said, but Doyle was more puzzled than any one. When he left the mountain-cabin the horse stood in the stable, securely tied, and no blood-stain was upon him.

How, then, had it come there?—more than that, how had the horse come there?

Doyle was at fault. It had been agreed that Warren should not leave the mountain refuge, but watch closely over Allen Sterling. The presence of the horse showed that something was wrong, but what it was Yates had no means of knowing.

The men of the Bend reasoned more clearly, if less accurately. They had before decided that Sterling had been killed on the trail, and now it was natural that they should decide it was his life-blood which broke the jet-blackness of the horse's shoulder.

Yates was inclined to agree with them, and he anxiously asked himself whether it was the blood of Warren or of Sterling. So anxious did he feel, he decided to leave the Bend at once and hasten to the mountain, and as soon as he dared he ordered his horse from the hotel and spurred away.

"Go!" he said, driving his heels into the

horse's side. "Faster, you brute, faster! I must know the meaning of this!"

There was meaning enough for it, if he but knew the truth; but the trio of plotters at the Bend borrowed no trouble. They were sorry the horse had found its way there, but the blood-stain proved, as they thought, that their tools had done their work well.

The horse was stabled, the trailer and another man set off to find the clew to the mystery, if possible, and the Bend awaited the next sensation.

Jack Bunker held himself in readiness to fight or flee. Each hour deepened his suspicion that a systematic plan had been put against him, and he was trying to satisfactorily place the blame. If he was suspected it would be well for him to get out of town for a while, but he had so put his tools forward for the open work that he hoped to escape molestation. How much did his allies suffer was a matter of indifference to him.

Kellogg came to him in the saloon, where he was smoking his pipe in his usual phlegmatic way.

"Jack, they're after me!" muttered the coward, as he sunk into a chair; and his evil genius saw that he had been drinking deeply to drown his fears and gain courage.

"Who?"

"They! I tell you I am watched. Several men are after me; every one looks at me suspiciously."

"Rubbish! this is all your fancy. What you need is nerve, an' all ther liquor at ther Bend won't give you ther genuine article. Brace up, man; force yerself ter take it cool!"

"How can I? The shadow of the law is over me!"

Kellogg buried his face in his hands. Bunker looked about to make sure there were no listeners. He saw only Daddy Clover, who was taking a drunken sleep not far away—if his heavy breathing spoke truthfully as to his condition.

Then he kicked his ally viciously, not liking his dismal looks. Such things invite attention.

The result of the kick, however, was unexpected.

Kellogg started up with a howl, which startled all except Daddy Clover; then seeing there was no danger, sunk back in his chair with a sickly laugh.

It was an unpleasant occurrence, but Jack was equal to the emergency.

"Hit yer shin, did ye?" he said, as though in answer to a remark from Horace. "Wal, you should remember wood is harder than flesh an' bone." Then leaning forward, he added in a lower tone: "Curse ye, no more o' that or I'll fix ye past yowlin'!"

Kellogg was wise enough to see in his glittering eyes a danger even greater than the first, and he made an effort and threw off his nightmare partially. Ordering whisky, he gave the bar-keeper's health and drank it down.

"That's all right," said Bunker, "but you don't want to do it any more. You'll get ez rull ez a fish an' begin ter talk, ef you don't hold on. Brace up on nerve; that's ther way ter do it. Bennett is jugged, but he won't give anything away, an' all ther rest will come out straight. Your rival, Sterling, hez gone up ther creek an' counts one out; while ez fur ther old man's gold, call me a fool ef I don't get it!"

"You are a man of steel!"

"All rubbish. I am a man o' flesh an' blood, but I endure what I can't cure an' strike fur my cause when I kin. Do you ther same, an' hev no fear."

His rugged courage conveyed a shadow of itself to the younger villain, and he began to hold up his head. Bad as matters looked, all might not be lost.

CHAPTER XXX.

STERLING'S FURTHER ADVENTURES.

We left Allen Sterling riding toward the Bend with what seemed good prospects of reaching there without further trouble; but having seen one of the horses with which he started from the robbers' cabin arrive at the town riderless and blood-stained, it becomes evident that all had not gone well on the trail.

What had happened?

Allen started with one horse between his knees and the other led behind, but he had not gone many rods before it became clear he had undertaken a difficult task. The night was intensely dark, baffling his eyesight, and he had not gone on for over five minutes when the horse he rode stepped in a hole and nearly flung him over his head.

Taught caution in this way, he moved still slower, but his next experience was to run into a *cul-de-sac*. From this he retraced his steps and started afresh, but he was growing undeniably nervous. He had moved but a short distance from the cabin, and there began to be real danger that Warren might recover his senses.

If he did, and found both horses and prisoner gone, he would speedily be on the track. The immense sum of money taken from him would be a spur almost equal to the loss of life.

And he would naturally look for his late prisoner in just the direction he had gone.

Allen saw his danger and did not like the situation at all. He was tempted to abandon the horses, but if he did that Warren would regain them and stand all the chance in the world of overtaking him the next day, or whenever he ventured from the mountain to the plain.

Such being the case, he resolved to hang to them.

One more experience like his first, however, showed him it was dangerous to ride, and that, in all probability, he had deviated from the route followed by the outlaws.

"There's only one way for it; I must get off and walk; but as I can go as fast that way as any other, it may be the best in the end. Certainly, I shall be less of a target than in the saddle."

He dismounted and, leading both animals, passed along quite briskly. He was able to choose a decent route, and as he soon entered a gulch, it seemed he had struck the proper course.

The way, too, improved under foot and he remounted. The horses went more confidently, and he had soon covered a quarter of a mile. He went in total darkness, however, for the sides of the gulch had assumed the size of cliffs and shut him in as in a tomb.

Once, he fancied he heard hoof-strokes behind him and turned in the saddle; but as it was a baseless fear, he saw nothing. He could not prevent a feeling of gloom, however, and had he been back at Big Nugget Bend he would have been a happy man.

Another disappointment awaited him; the gulch suddenly ended at the foot of a third cliff; he was in another *cul-de-sac*.

This time he resolved to desert the horses and take to the mountain on foot. It was easier planned than done. When he attempted to scale the cliff he found it impossible.

There was no help for it; he must retrace his steps.

So he rode back, keeping sharp watch by the way. It was not a cheerful ride, as will easily be seen, for the chances were Warren had before then recovered his senses and gone in pursuit.

Allen derived a little satisfaction from the fact that he had taken all visible weapons when he left the cabin. Had this fact been otherwise, what occurred might have been prevented by additional precautions on his part.

As he neared the eastern end of the gulch he rode slowly, looking for a chance to turn to the left.

He was still looking, when suddenly, the blackness before him became lighted by a brilliant flash, and in the middle of the light he saw, for one brief instant, the form of a man who was kneeling on the ground with a rifle stretched out before him.

He had no chance to recognize him; but as his horse made a bound, reared and fell over against the other, and thence to the ground, there was little room to doubt.

It was Warren.

Allen was enough of a horseman to leap from his saddle under such circumstances, but in the present case he was baffled by a fact just mentioned. His own horse fell against the other, and when Allen made a leap he found his foot caught and held between the two.

Another moment and the wounded horse was down, and there lay Allen, his leg pinned beneath him.

The next sound to break the silence was the clatter of hoofs as the second animal bounded away; but the first one lay quite still, and Sterling wrenched in vain to free his leg.

To add to the danger of the situation, he saw the late marksman running toward him.

Clearly, prompt action was necessary, or Allen would never come out of the affair alive.

He was equal to the emergency. Hastily drawing his revolver, he raised it without a word and pulled the trigger, once, twice!

The fire checked, but did not seem to injure, the would-be assassin. Seeing a difference between being marksman and target, he stopped his advance and disappeared.

For a moment Allen was at a loss to account for this, but as he saw a bowlder in the middle of the gulch, he realized that his enemy had taken refuge there.

He made a desperate effort to free his leg, but failed. The horse, dead before he touched the ground, had not stirred after he fell, and there the young man was held. To save his life he could not pull his limb out, and, of course, he could not roll an eleven-hundred pounds horse off of himself with his legs sticking out the wrong way.

It was a situation almost maddening, but after awhile Allen grew calmer and resolved to make the best of it. Beyond a doubt the other man was Warren, and as he must know the coveted money was in Allen's pocket he would spare no pains to recover it.

"I must watch for him like a cat!"

It was a wise resolution and, no longer paying attention to the horse, he lay motionless and watched and listened with all possible care.

The wisdom of this course was soon shown. He heard the double click which tells of the cocking of a firm-arm and settled well down behind the dead horse.

Another moment and the fusilade opened. Six times in rapid succession the revolver was discharged and a leaden hail whistled around Sterling. About half the shots went over, while others struck with a dull *chug* in the body of the horse; but Allen remained unharmed.

So jubilant was he over this fact, he could not avoid a derisive shout.

"Try again, my good man; try again, and then I'll take my turn!"

An answer was promptly returned in Warren's voice.

"Come out, you coward, and fight me boldly!"

"Excuse me, but I like very well where I am."

"You are a coward!"

"All right!"

"See here! If you'll surrender that money, I'll let you go."

"You're very kind, but I have other plans."

"You shall never take it away alive!"

"Who will prevent it?"

"I will."

"Mr. Warren, don't think me too severe, but I want this money to buy up Denver. And I'm going to do it, if I can hold on to the money. If you want it, you must come and get it!"

A curse was the only answer and then another silence followed. Allen resumed his careful watching and listening. Forced as he was to keep his position, he must not allow Warren to steal on him unawares.

Several minutes rolled on without further hostile demonstrations and he employed a part of his time in trying to get his foot out of his boot. If he could do this he believed he could draw his leg from under the horse.

While thus engaged he heard a barely-audible sound at his left. The place was several yards from Warren's bowlder and he did not at first think it was his enemy, but as it continued it was so like a man cautiously crawling along the ground that he could no longer doubt.

Warren had left the bowlder unheard by him, by making a wide *detour*, and was creeping up from a new quarter—one from which he would no longer be protected by his equine breastwork.

Clearly, this advance must be stopped.

So Allen leveled his revolver as well as he could, under the circumstances, and pulled the trigger.

A quick movement on the part of the creeper followed the shot—and then utter silence. Allen smiled grimly. He knew he had not seriously wounded the man, if, indeed, he had touched him at all, but his experience would teach him caution.

Another long pause followed. Allen worked fitfully to release his leg—fitfully, because it would not do to relax his vigilance for a moment. Warren was going to have the money nestling in his late prisoner's pocket if such a thing was possible.

Probably he would have waited for daylight and then picked him off at his leisure, but it remained a fact that Allen might in the mean while slip away, and if he went he would not leave the money.

An hour passed. Allen was suffering a good deal of pain from the continued weight on his leg and the effort to release it, but he would not cease his work. Already he had started his boot from his foot, and complete success seemed only a matter of time.

Anon, he heard the old creeping sound, this time at his right. Warren had long been silent, but Sterling knew he was again moving forward to accomplish his work.

The young man set his teeth and lay close to the dead horse. His revolver was already cocked and he did not need to touch it.

Nearer and nearer came the soft, creeping sound, until at last Allen believed he could see his enemy. He dared not wait any longer and, aiming as well as he could, he pulled the trigger.

The flash and report were not much ahead of a dull, heavy fall and the dark figure disappeared. Whether it was on the ground or not Allen could not say positively, but there was no rapid retreat and the rustling sound was heard no more.

Satisfied that all danger was past, he renewed his efforts to release his imprisoned limb, and as he was no longer hampered by the caution he had to use before, it was not long before he was free from his boot.

The next thing was to get free from the horse, and this he accomplished finally, though not without severe pain.

He had thought all would be well then, but the result proved the error of his reasoning. So long had his leg been held down, it was like a thing of lead when he tried to use it, and he could not stand.

One thing only was needed, however; friction would bring back its olden power; and he sat down to chafe it.

While so doing he wondered how he was to get back to Big Nugget Bend. Of the horses, one was dead and the other had run away.

He hoped the latter might be recovered, but, as we have seen, the animal had left the mountain in hot haste, and made its way to the Bend, stained by the blood of his dead mate, to spread fresh alarm there.

And when day broke Allen Sterling saw the body of Warren lying flat on its face twenty feet away. Forever done with the world was the man, and Allen was free to go where he would. And in his pocket was the robber's money.

CHAPTER XXXI.

DEACON STONEFIST SHOWS A BETTER SPIRIT.

BARTHOLOMEW BLAKE walked into the money-lender's office. His face was as stern as ever; but as he passed through the door he paused abruptly. Zora was at the desk, but her head was bowed and her attitude one of sorrow and dejection.

Despite this she made a pretty picture, and the reformer may have realized it as he looked. Certainly, his face changed expression and grew less stern, and he seemed to hesitate to break the silence.

When he did it was not in his usual fashion, but with a cough which was almost embarrassed.

The girl looked up quickly. Her face was unusually flushed, and her eyes red, sure signs that she had been weeping. A shadow flitted over her face at sight of him, and he was shrewd enough to know he was not welcome. Still, he had given aid to her father, and she did not turn away from him. Instead, she greeted him pleasantly.

"You are in trouble," he said, slowly.

His voice lacked the old, severe inflection, and she noticed it at once.

"Yes," she said, simply.

"May I ask the cause?"

"There is more than one thing to trouble me, but I am chiefly worried about Allen Sterling. You have heard how the horse came in stained with blood, and people think it is that of Mr. Sterling."

"You feel kindly toward the young man?"

"I do. He has been an inmate of our house for some time, and both my father and myself regard him highly."

"The young man is fortunate."

Blake spoke mechanically, as it seemed, and looked at vacancy, but Flora put a marked meaning to his words.

"He was like a brother to me," she said, explanatorily.

"One would think he was something more."

"I don't know why one should. You refer to my tears, I suppose, but people—at least such worldly people as I—shed tears for a brother. I cared for him no more than that. Besides, I believe he cared for another girl I could name."

"Who is she?"

"That is a secret not mine to tell."

"I can surmise; you refer to the school-teacher. I hope you are wrong. She is of a cold, proud nature, and until she changes her heart, unworthy of such a regard."

"I don't know why she is. I have never seen the signs of pride you refer to; all people are not alike. Perhaps, however, neither of us is a good judge."

A slight smile came to Blake's face, but it quickly disappeared. He did not fail to detect the rebuke.

"You speak of other trouble," he gravely said. "What is it?"

"All this warfare against my father troubles me."

"One of the evil men who have plotted against him is in confinement, and the rest may soon be secured. Mr. Wisecraft, the lawyer, is helping your father."

"I do not trust that man," she said, quickly.

"Why not?"

Zora hesitated. It seemed strange that she should trust Blake, especially as she had so often quarreled with him, and yet she was inclined to do so.

"The first time he came here there was something said which worried my father greatly. What it was I do not know, for he would not confide in me—he even declared my suspicions unfounded; but I was not so easily deceived. Mr. Wisecraft has had a good deal to do with our affairs lately, and father has evidently come to look upon him as a friend and ally; but I am not so easily led to forget the past. There was something then which led father to regard him as anything except a friend, and I believe 'Old Ketchum' is trying to get him wholly in his power. I am afraid he has escaped a sword-fish to meet a shark!"

There was a curious mixture of sorrow and defiance, of confidential ways and indifference in the girl's manner, but Blake received it gravely and thoughtfully.

"I think you are wrong about the lawyer," he then replied. "He is an eccentric man, but I believe he is honorable."

"This is a new way for you to talk. I thought you believed all people villains."

The Deacon did not change expression.

"There is still ample reason for me to bring men to see their failings while cards and liquor rule in Big Nugget Bend. But, having taken sides in this plot against Mr. Lockyard, I must necessarily forget my professional duties and distinguish between what is partially bad and what is all bad."

"Classing me as all bad, I suppose," said Zora, with a laugh.

"No," he answered. "I have pointed out sundry failings of yours, but I see you have discarded your worldly dress for one of becoming black—"

"It was because I felt sorrowful enough for it; I shall put on the plaid you so abhor just as soon as Allen Sterling returns safely."

She made the assertion with a mixture of real and feigned defiance, but even that failed to bring the old, harsh look to his face.

"I hope not, child," he gravely said. "I hope you have enough regard for my friendly interest to leave gay colors and ribbons to your weaker sisters."

"Still, I don't believe I have."

"Would you deliberately go contrary to my expressed wishes?"

"Why shouldn't I?"

"I have an interest in you."

Zora could not avoid laughing.

"At what per cent.?" she asked, mischievously.

"That all depends on yourself and how much you deserve."

"Well, I don't believe I deserve much, and you had better not bet anything on me."

"But! Do you suppose I would be guilty of such a thing?"

There was a touch of his old manner in his question.

"Why not, if you see a chance to win?"

"Child, this levity is shocking!"

Before she could answer there was a shout outside the office and both went to the door. They had scarcely done so before Zora uttered a cry of joy. Allen Sterling was approaching the house accompanied by several of his sympathetic fellow-townsmen, who had met and were escorting him in triumph to his old post.

One look was enough to show him in good condition and then Deacon Stonefist turned to Zora.

"Now is the chance to don the gaudy dress," he slowly said.

Zora started and looked into his face. It was composed and without the shadow of a smile; and though he did not show any severity it was evident he wished to try her.

For a moment she hesitated, but it was not in her nature to openly displease him after their late interview.

"I think my present dress will do for now," she replied.

They had time to say no more, for Allen was at hand, and he deserved attention.

Zora greeted him warmly, and then his other friends went away. All knew he would resume his place at Lockyard's office, but no one knew of the money in his pocket.

This fact he intended to keep secret for a time, at least. It was as much his as any one's, though he was not sure he should keep it. It was the fruit of robbery; and though Warren was dead and Yates would not dare to claim it, it would be a fortune he could not enjoy without many misgivings. But if he kept it and said nothing, Yates would be sure to suspect where it was, he argued, and it might lead to his being caught.

An investigation had been begun to learn if he was still at the Bend in disguise; but it was not likely he would delay long after Allen's return.

As the reader already knows, he had gone away as soon as the blood-stained horse came in.

At this juncture a note was brought to Blake, signed by Lockyard, and requesting his presence in Wisecraft's office; and he went over at once.

He found Old Ketchum in bed, and likely to remain there for some time. The wound received from Bunker's revolver, and which he had at first treated lightly, was giving him a good deal more trouble than he had anticipated. The best surgical skill at the Bend had been employed, but the chances were the lawyer would keep his bed for some time to come.

All this was explained to Blake by Ketchum and Lockyard, who spoke alternately, and then the lawyer added:

"This blow comes at an unlucky time. I am here with important work on my hands; I am engaged in a tug of war which concerns more than myself; and it is of vital importance that the work go on. I need a strong, resolute man to undertake the task I must for the time abandon, and I have turned to you, Mr. Blake. Will you aid me?"

Lockyard's face expressed dissatisfaction, and it was clear he did not approve of putting a crank forward in such a way; but Blake's face did not change.

"I cannot answer until I know the nature of the work," he evenly replied.

"It is a battle for right, justice, and a father-

less girl," replied Ketchum, gravely. "You cannot but give your sympathy."

And then in the gathering twilight he began his story, revealing another proof of man's avarice and crime.

CHAPTER XXXII.

KELLOGG'S CLAIM.

It was an hour later when Nathan Lockyard returned to his own house. He went with a shadow on his face which seemed to have permanently replaced the old, peaceful expression. And the shadow was not caused by direct meditation on his own affairs, which had materially brightened with Sterling's return.

He was thinking of Old Ketchum and trying to measure the man. What was he to think of him?—was he better or worse than he seemed? It was a question hard to answer.

Not many days before, when the lawyer first called upon him, he had referred to a secret the money-lender hoped, and believed, was forever buried in the grave of the past. It was this which had troubled him, as Zora had seen, and the reason that he would not confide in her was that the secret intimately concerned her.

This interview led Lockyard to regard Ketchum as his enemy, but close after it came other interviews. Twice, the money-lender had been warned of plots against him through Ketchum's instrumentality. As a result, the plots had failed. Consequently, Ketchum was to be regarded as a friend if all was honest and above-board.

But was it so?

At times, from the very beginning, he had felt a vague doubt, a self-inquiry whether the lawyer was not the instigator of all these plots. But meditation had brought no answer; Old Ketchum was an enigma.

And the story told to Bartholomew Blake, according to Lockyard's opinion, only served to increase the mystery. The lawyer had enveloped his so-called "tug of war" in a veil of uncertainty. He had not called any names, reserving that for another time, he said, but merely giving an outline so Blake could decide what to do.

In answer, Blake had promptly agreed to manage affairs and do what was necessary while Ketchum was recovering.

Lockyard hardly knew which seemed the greatest crank. Ketchum's vague, mysterious ways, and his confidence in Blake, an avowed crank, all looked unexplainable if he was in his right mind.

So the money-lender went home perplexed and troubled.

But, once there, he partially forgot all this. Sterling was back, alive and well, with a story of adventure to tell, and Zora was in such good spirits that even her father soon remembered how to laugh.

Half the evening passed agreeably, but after Sterling went out another bondbshell made its appearance. The door between the inner and outer office had been left open, and a footstep became audible where they sat. Lockyard arose, but he might have saved himself the trouble. The man who had entered came straight to the inner room and, meeting the money-lender at the door, paused and stood like a statue.

Lockyard started back with a sudden change of expression. He knew the visitor and was not pleased to see him.

It was Horace Kellogg.

Weeks had passed since the younger man had crossed his uncle's threshold, but he had only himself to thank for the fact. He had been helped financially until further aid was folly, and worse, for all had been spent in dissipation, and a complete breach had followed Lockyard's refusal to help him further.

Even when they had met in the street they did not speak, for Horace had refused to notice the man he could not dupe.

But, this evening, he had come again, and as he stood there, an insolent smile on his face, it was plain he had been drinking heavily.

"Top of the evening to your worship!" he impudently said. "Glad to see you looking so blooming, and the same to you, my fair cousin. Zounds! how she grows angelic, don't she old man?"

"Never mind this," said the money-lender, firmly. "Why have you come here, Horace?"

"To clasp your honored hand and, I think—yes; I am sure of it—to kiss my charming Zora!"

He started toward the girl as he spoke, but Lockyard stepped between them.

"Keep back, sir," said the old man, an indignant quiver in his voice. "Do not add insult to insult!"

"Insult?"

"Yes, sir; for the touch of your lips, affected as you are by liquor, would be contamination for her."

Kellogg laughed unmusically.

"So-ho! the cat jumps that way, does she? Our Zora is too good for me to look at, is she?"

"Yes, sir; she is!" Lockyard declared.

"A rare comedian you are, uncle Nate, but I like melodrama better; there's always a start-

ling revelation in that line of business. I'll play melodrama to your comedy. But, sit down, old man, sit down. I'll relinquish the cousinly salute until I have proved that I'm worthy of it. Sit down!"

Kellogg, himself, took a seat, but his uncle remained standing, a nervous trembling perceptible about his hands and a look of disgust and something more on his face. He had the courage to try to throw his visitor from the house, but he remembered that he was his sister's child and forced himself to practice forbearance.

The younger man had an insolent triumph about him that aroused all of Zora's indignation, while the fumes of liquor floated across the room to her corner. She could no longer remain silent.

"For shame, Horace Kellogg!" she said, quickly. "Is this the way you should talk to a man of father's years?"

"Never mind, my pretty Puritan; I'll get around to you anon, but soon enough for your liking."

"I'd like it better if you kept out of my sight altogether."

"No doubt, but you see, I won't."

"You did not talk so bravely as this when you tried to force your company on Miss Lawrence and found a man there to talk to you."

"Another county heard from! So Al Sterling has gone about boasting of that affair. Let him boast; I'll get at him again, one of these days."

"You had better not, without taking a surgeon with you."

"Indeed, my beauty! Well, I know your long tongue, and won't waste words with you; only let me say one thing; I'm coming to you directly, and when I do, you will think an earthquake has struck. Uncle Nate, give your attention, for I have a word to say."

Lockyard sat down.

"Say it quickly then," he replied.

"On, slow and easy is well enough for me, and I'll put enough vim in what I say to make amends for slowness. Something like this: Miss Zora, you think you are the heiress of a fortune. You are not. Neither are you Nate Lockyard's daughter!"

His words these seemed to Zora, but, much to her surprise, her father gave a very perceptible start.

"Ah! the shot goes home!" chuckled the young villain. "Uncle Nate feels it, for he knows it's true. Zora, the Lord only knows who you are—perhaps your history is better left untold and unhinted at—but you are not Lockyard's daughter!"

The girl looked at the money-lender with terror expressed on her face, and there she saw enough to bring her from her chair and to his feet.

"Father! father!" she cried, "say that this is not so! Say I am your child! For Heaven's sake, don't say no!"

There was a depth of feeling, a tragic earnestness in her voice which few people would have given her credit for, but Kellogg's unfeeling laugh came in as a disagreeable and almost demonic interpolation.

But no one heeded him; perhaps no one heard him. Lockyard was thinking only of Zora.

"You are my child—the child of my heart!" he cried.

"Law and hearts are two different things, uncle Nate. You know that not one drop of your blood runs in the veins of this girl, this Zora—Zounds! what is her name? A child of the gutter, fatherless, motherless—"

"Stop!" almost thundered the money-lender. "Not another word, sir. I cast the lie back in your teeth. If God, in his infinite wisdom, has not seen proper to make her my child in fact, he has, at least, given her an ancestry as honorable as that of any one. No child of mystery is she, but her father and mother were my dearest friends in former days, even as she is my one great treasure now. For, come what will, I love my child and I will stand between her and all storms!"

Lockyard spoke in an earnest and ringing voice, and his mild face was full of a lofty and noble fervor. Zora lay in his arms, quivering pitifully, but her face was hidden and she said no more.

"All very well, and we'll let that part pass," said Horace, flippantly. "I don't care whether she comes of bovel or palace; but one thing is certain, she is not your heiress. She is not your daughter, and I am next of kin!"

Kellogg arose and stretched out one hand toward the girl.

"Put out the impostor!" he added. "Put her out and give me my rights! I am your heir, and I demand treatment due me as such!"

Had the speaker been sober he would scarcely have made such a demand in a land where men are free to leave their property as they see fit.

"You will receive the treatment you deserve and none other!" Lockyard retorted.

"I demand my rights!"

"Peace!" said the money-lender more gently. "You have been drinking, Horace, and do not know what you say."

"Don't I?" the fellow retorted. "I'll soon

show you. Look ye, my worthy uncle, I've been made a cat's-paw by those who knew me better than I know myself, but I am set right at last and I'll have my rights. Open your money-drawers and give me your gold!"

He put out his hands and advanced a step. A dangerous light was in his eyes and he seemed scarcely conscious what he did. Lockyard shivered and wished for Sterling's return, while Zora turned at the sound of his voice and turned paler yet.

"Money! money!" the young villain repeated. "I'll have it or strangle you where you sit!"

"Stand back or I'll call for help!" Lockyard exclaimed.

"You won't call but once; you won't call at all!" was the fierce reply. "I'll settle you at once!"

With this cry he sprung forward. The older man tried to rise, but was forced back by stronger hands, and then, as Zora uttered a scream, the assassin hands closed over Nathan Lockyard's throat.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

A STORY OF BURIED TREASURE.

THAT evening Jack Bunker and Warfield met in one of the lowest saloons of the town by appointment. Lines had become so sharply drawn since Bennett was captured that they dared not meet in Warfield's room, as usual. Bunker had induced Kellogg to go to bed and hoped that he would remain there until his overdose of liquor worked off—though the reader has seen he did not.

Warfield was the last to arrive at the saloon. He found Bunker at the further side, where the miners were scattered, and he sauntered over to him as though it was a chance meeting.

"So you've got along," growled Jack.

"Hush! Not so loud," said Warfield, warningly.

"What're you afraid of?"

"Listeners are what I'm afraid of," was the sharp reply.

"Do you s'pose men kin hear supernaturally?"

Warfield looked about, but only one man was near them. Daddy Clover was sprawled out over a chair and table, a favorite position of his, and breathing stertorously. A more innocent looking object than he it would be hard to find.

"Let us have no more words, Bunker; I have come to talk business."

"Blaze away!"

"I am going to leave the Bend."

"Is that so?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

"Because I mean to keep my precious skin out of trouble if I can, and it is clear our day with Lockyard is past. Matters have gone all wrong, and it is only a question of time when you and I get roped in like Bennett if we stay here. I don't mean to stay. I'm going to get out of the Bend on the run."

"In that case, you git no pay."

"I don't want any, and if I did I don't believe I should get it from you. You don't look like a millionaire."

Warfield spoke lightly, but Bunker took offense at once.

"Don't ye make no mistake, pard. A ragged coat don't always kiver an empty pocket. Ez fur me, I kin buy you up, ten times over."

"Got the money about you now?"

"I'll tell ye whar 'tis, mister," said Jack, beligerently. "Under my cabin thar is fifty thousand dollars buried, all mine an' all good money. Kin you beat that? Mebbe, too, you think you kin get it on ther sly. Wal, let me say ther critter don't live that kin take it away while Jack Bunker lives!"

"Nonsense! Do you suppose I am fool enough to try? I know your way, gentle Jack, and don't hunger for a supper of lead. But do you intend to remain here?"

Bunker did not answer at once.

"I swar I don't know what ter do," he finally said. "I hev played fur a big stake an' hate ter lose, but I hev a due respect fur ther law. I've about made up my mind ter levant; so near it, in fact, that I have let Hod Kellogg into a leetle secret o' interest ter him. Zora Lockyard is no more than an adopted darter, an' I've said ez much ter Kell an' put him on ther track."

"Look here, Bunker, what sort of a wizard are you? How do you happen to know so much about Lockyard?"

Jack chuckled grimly.

"Never you mind," he replied. "Mebbe I'll tell ye some day, but ef I do you will be 'stonished. Wait till then!"

Murder was in Horace Kellogg's heart and murder would soon have been upon his hands, but there came a timely interruption. Zora's cries had not been in vain, as a quick footstep proved, and as the young villain compressed Lockyard's neck still tighter, he was suddenly seized and flung backward so forcibly that he fell flat on the floor.

And in a moment more a heavy foot was

planted on his breast and the tall form of Bartholomew Blake stood over him like the stern avenger he was.

"Vile wretch!" exclaimed the Deacon, "you have at last reached the point I have predicted for you, and tried to dye your hands in human blood. Woo be to Big Nugget Bend that such men live within her limits!"

"Let me up!" hissed Horace, writhing like a wounded snake. "Let me up, curse you! or I will have your blood!"

"You over-rate your power," was the steady reply. "Try to your utmost, if you wish, and see the result."

"There's another time ahead."

"Not for you, sir, for you have gone to the length of your rope. Wretched man, do you suppose your share in the late plot against this worthy gentleman could be kept secret? All is known, and Bunker, Warfield and yourself shall keep young Bennett company in his cell. Your trial and sentence to prison will follow in due time."

Deacon Stonefist spoke in a voice which chilled Kellogg's blood. The liquor cleared away from his brain a little and left him the coward he really was. Dropping all pretense to firmness, he pleaded for mercy, nothing more. He swore that if they would release him he would leave Big Nugget Bend and never again be seen by any of them.

The sting of his fingers was still on Lockyard's neck, but the old man remembered that he was his dead sister's child and would have told Blake to free him at once had not the latter prevented it by a sign. Instead, cords were brought and the fellow secured despite all his pleading.

"Later," said Stonefist, "you can use mercy if you will; that is not for me to say. Now, however, let justice proceed. I have undertaken to do the work confided to me by Lawyer Wisecraft and I shall abate no jot or tittle of righteous vigor. The men who have plotted against you must all be seized to-night and the majesty of law vindicated. I have tried to reform Big Nugget Bend by gentle means, but I see the heavy hand of law is needed. One example may make the other misguided men see their sins."

They did not argue with him, and when Allen Sterling returned he went away.

Zora went to the money-lender with a pitiful look on her face, her lips trembling perceptibly.

"What is it, child?" he kindly asked.

"Is it true that I am not your daughter?"

"It is true," he said, caressing her hair. "We are of no kin by the tie of blood, but stronger than that is the tie of the heart. You are my adopted child and I love you as tenderly as a father could."

"And my own parents?"

"They were friends of mine, the truest I ever had. Your father was my school-friend; your mother, a fair, loving and noble woman. Death came to them when you were a mere babe, and in that hour I promised to care for you always. It was not a part of the agreement that you should be known as my own child, but I soon learned to love you so that I could not bear to be loved less in return than as a father."

"And as such you shall always be loved," she said, putting aside all regret for the gratitude she owed him.

"One thing I do not understand," added the money-lender, frowning thoughtfully. "How did Horace know you were not my daughter? I did not suppose any one west of the Mississippi, except myself, possessed the secret."

Zora suggested that they ask the prisoner, but when it was done they were not much the wiser. Jack Bunker had told him, he said. But who was Jack Bunker? A village desperado, who was not supposed to know anything beyond the acts of drinking, gambling and acting the desperado.

Kellogg did not see fit to reveal all, and they were still left in ignorance of the fact that Bunker had laid, and led, the plot to rob them.

But Kellogg knew little more about his evil genius than did they, and the secret of Bunker's power was yet to be revealed.

In the meanwhile, Blake had gone out and mustered enough honest men to seize Bunker and Warfield. He had taken up Old Ketchum's tug of war in earnest, but the miners would not follow him until some of them had interviewed the old lawyer and received his assurance of support in case of trouble.

So one honest man was made sheriff, and Bunker and Warfield were arrested. We need not pause to tell of their wrath and assumed indignation; enough that they were seized and confined where they could do no harm, neither escape from the just vengeance of law.

Having seen this work done, Deacon Stonefist went to the cabin of Ben Pollack, and asked for Miss Lawrence. He found her with Betty, as usual, and the small girl looked at him belligerently.

Blake stated that he had come from Old Ketchum, who wished to see her, and Althea quickly put on her hat and shawl and accompanied him. Betty was left behind, to her vast indignation.

Once on the way, however, Blake began to talk.

"We are not going to Wisecraft, Miss Lawrence; that is, not unless you insist upon it. He has confided a good deal of your affairs to me, and I shall work for you to the best of my ability. The man Bunker has at one time wrongfully appropriated money belonging to you, I understand. To-day he let fall certain remarks which led us to believe he has buried this money beneath the floor of his cabin, and Wisecraft has suggested that I dig there for it with you to watch me."

"To watch you?"

"Yes," replied Blake, without a ripple of resentment. "Of course the money is yours, not mine, and I might run away with it."

"I am sure Mr. Wisecraft did not mean that," said Althea, laughing in spite of herself.

"I am sure he did, and his precaution is a wise one. Big Nugget Bend is bad, all bad, and it is well that a man should doubt every one that he can't watch. Crime runs rampant here, and no one can be trusted."

"Yet I shall trust you, Mr. Blake."

"Don't! I warn you not to do it. I begin to feel the sinful fever so contagious in this forsaken and undone town rushing through my veins. There is no knowing what I may do. So, when I dig for this buried treasure, you may well watch me."

The reformer spoke with as much severity as he had used to other people, and for a crank he was certainly commendably consistent. He felt the grasp of waywardness upon him, and was resolved to chastise wherever he found cause for it.

But Althea, after laughing a little, grew very grave and doubtful. The next few hours bade fair to do much toward settling her future, and everything trembled in the balance. Which way the scale would tip was uncertain; luckily for her, perhaps, she knew not what the future had in store for her.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DIGGING FOR THE TREASURE.

It was not difficult to enter Bunker's cabin. Having little exposed to view that was worth stealing he never fastened the door, and all they had to do was to push it open and enter.

Blake had provided himself with a lantern, and this he at once set upon the table. Althea looked about with curiosity, but her companion acted as though he had often been there.

"Now," he said, "it is very likely we have a long task ahead of us, and as we do not want to be interrupted, it will be well to secure the door and keep out intruders."

He did as he said, while Althea finished her survey of the place. She was again proving that she had good nerves, for every one would not care to be thus shut up with the crank of the Bend, despite the fact that an emergency had served to put his monomania for a time in the background and make him a man of sense.

"It does not seem possible that our enemy has been dwelling here so long," said the girl, absently.

"Refer to the unhappy man as your enemy, if you will, but not as mine. Though he has deviated widely from the path of rectitude, he is still a fellow-creature and I cannot pass him by. I hope to see him reform, though at the eleventh hour!"

Stonefist had picked up the spade and he stood with it held in one hand while with the other he emphasized his remarks by appropriate gestures. He was consistent, even then.

"Have it as you will," the girl answered, somewhat impatiently, "but let us not stop for argument. There is work to be done."

"And I am the laborer."

The reformer turned away and began tearing up the floor of the cabin. This was not hard, for it was but loosely laid. Once up, he examined the whole area carefully, looking for a place where there were signs of previous digging.

"He has left no clew," he said, at the end of the search, "but this need not discourage us. It was not to be expected."

"I have little hope," Althea remarked.

"Be not so easily discouraged. All things are possible to the resolute."

Without further useless words Blake began his work. He plunged the spade into the ground and turned the first mass of earth. From there he went on steadily. If he worked like a novice it was not without zeal and every stroke showed an effect. He worked systematically, so as to handle no earth a second time and the excavation grew steadily larger.

Althea held the light and looked on with painful interest. Her future seemed at stake on the result of that night's effort. At Big Nugget Bend people had thought her no more than a poor, but resolute, woman, who had deserted the scenes amid which she was reared to conquer her fortune in the West. Little did they know of the drama in her past life; little did they suspect a daughter's vow had taken her to the Bend, there to seek, not for revenge, but for justice.

At the end of an hour Blake was compelled to stop for breath. Strong as he was the work was

new to him, and great beads of perspiration stood on his forehead.

Both his face and Althea's began to have an anxious expression. He knew very well that the earth he had thus far turned had never before been molested by man; at least not since Big Nugget Bend had a being; and unless fate was coquettishly reserving their triumph for the last moment, it might be withheld altogether.

The night wore on and still the solitary digger worked. The scene was a strange one, but the minds of the couple were bent on only one point. And as the space grew smaller, and the spade failed to reveal the buried treasure, their faces grew correspondingly grave.

The conviction was forced upon both that Jack Bunker had lied; that no treasure was buried under the cabin; and that they were no nearer triumph than they were a week before.

At last, when he had explored the last corner, Blake partially arose, and, leaning against the wall, looked up and met his companion's gaze. Disappointment and dismay were written on her face, but his was as resolute as ever, though it might have been the courage of desperation.

"The last hope is gone!" she exclaimed.

"There is surely no hope of finding anything in this place," he admitted.

"And the fortune for which so much has been done, and suffered, is forever lost."

"That does not follow. It is a long road that has no turning, and Bunker has already met a check to his successful career. I deem this cause a worthy one and shall strain every nerve to succeed. He must be forced to disgorge his ill-gotten treasure."

"But how can it be done?"

"I am unable to say now, but I am enlisted in the cause of right and I will go on steadily to the end. Bunker shall either give up the money or be pushed to the wall."

"I have little hope," sighed Althea.

"Be not weak of heart. Am I not with you? I will spare no pains, and I will not spare the rod. In this case, extreme rigor is excusable."

He resumed work, and replaced the earth and the flooring as nearly as he could in their old places. When it was done there was nothing to show a casual observer that anything unusual had occurred.

After that he saw Althea safely home. Few people were out of bed at that hour and there was no one to wonder at seeing them together.

Althea secured a little sleep before morning, but she need not have been in a hurry about rising. Soon after breakfast a caller was announced and she went to the sitting-room to find Allen Sterling there.

She flushed a little at seeing him, while on his own part he showed unmistakable embarrassment.

"I hope you will pardon my intrusion, Miss Lawrence," he said, "but I am the bearer of a note from Bartholomew Blake."

He extended it as he spoke, but, though she received it, she looked at the bearer rather than the note.

"Why do you apologize for coming here?" she asked, diffidently.

"Because I thought it necessary," he bluntly answered.

"I hope you do not think so badly of me as that. I am not happy in my way of treating others, I am ready to believe; but you aided me when such aid was needed and you must not think me so mean-spirited as to forget it."

"If I was to ask remembrance, it would not be for what favors I may have bestowed. I wish to be judged merely for myself. But we will not speak of that. If you can tolerate my presence I am glad of it."

"Mr. Sterling, you humble me to the dust. I am obliged to confess that I have not treated you as I should, nor as your gentlemanly conduct deserved. But, believe me, there was a motive for it. Perhaps I will explain what I mean, before many days, and let you see I am not all pride and ingratitude."

"Believe me, I have never thought of so considering you," he replied, a good deal perplexed, but not at all displeased, at her change of manner. "I have never had a harsh thought for you, for I recognize the right of every woman to be her own mistress."

Having placed themselves on this amicable footing, they abandoned the subject and Miss Lawrence read her note. It was to the effect that, owing to the excitement in the village over the recent arrests, it was the wish of the people that the school be discontinued until the matter was settled. To this, Bartholomew Blake's name was signed.

Althea read it gravely, but she could not avoid the suspicion that it would never have been written but for Allen Sterling. So formal a way of doing business was not common to the Bend. But, even though it was all an excuse contrived by Allen to see her, she did not feel angry in the least degree. She had used him somewhat harshly and some atonement was surely right.

Her suspicion was unfounded, however, and as Allen walked away after a brief, but pleasant, interview, he was elated at her unusual kindness.

He had gone but a few yards, however, when

he saw Zora among the hills at the north of the town and at once resolved to join her. It was not a long walk, and though she disappeared long before he reached the place he went on without a thought of trouble.

His views changed, however, when a man suddenly stepped from behind a rock and confronted him, for in him he recognized a well-known acquaintance.

It was Yates, the robber partner of Warren. His hand fell to his pocket in search of his revolver, but the weapon was not there, and a grim smile crossed the outlaw's face as he realized the fact.

"Hallo! my young hound, you're just the man I wanted to see," he said, with an evil look.

"Well, I am here," Allen cautiously observed.

"So I see, and we will have a squaring of the old account while we can. You know what I mean."

"I know there is no love between us, but I need scarcely remind you who began the trouble."

"We used you well, I and my partner," said Yates, "but you got the upper hand, somehow, and carried a high hand. Warren is dead and I am robbed."

"I am aware of that."

"You take it coolly, curse you!"

"Not so fast. If you knew the circumstances of the case you would not blame me so much."

"Wouldn't I? I suppose you count the murder of Warren as nothing, but he was my partner for many a day, and a faithful one at that. Now I am going to avenge his death!"

"Not so fast. Let me tell you how it occurred. You lay all the blame to me, but you should blame your partner. It was he who robbed you, for he had turned traitor and resolved to run away with the money. That he failed to do so was because I managed to free myself and get the upper hand of him. We fought, with the odds in his favor, and I won the battle by a close chance. Mark what I say. Your partner was a traitor!"

"It's a lie!" Yates hotly exclaimed. "I've tried him in fair weather and foul and I knew him well. He rob me! He would as soon have cut off his hand!"

"I swear it was so. He—"

"You need not swear, for your lies will not go down. You are a coward to try it. But, in any case, Warren is dead, and you acknowledge he died by your hand. I am here as his avenger, and I am going to have a life for a life!"

CHAPTER XXXV.

A NEW MISFORTUNE.

YATES was in dead earnest; there could be no doubt about that. Whatever his other faults, he believed his late partner had been as true as he himself was, and as he had been killed by Sterling, Yates was resolved to avenge his death.

Sterling saw all this, and was trying to think of a way to save himself. It did no good to resolve never to go abroad unarmed again; he must find some way out of his present trouble.

But how was he to do it?

He did not possess a weapon, while Yates was fully armed, and there could be no doubt but the revolver in his hand was loaded and ready for use. If he tried to close with him, or to run, a bullet would speedily go crashing through him.

"It was a mistaken mercy that I spared you at the mountain cabin," the outlaw resumed. "I knew at the time you were a dangerous man, and one shot would have saved Warren's life and my money. What have you done with it?"

"You won't find it on my person, nor will you find it anywhere else. I have put it away, without saying a word to any one at the Bend, and if you shoot me it will decay or be eaten by vermin of some sort."

"I'll have it yet, I swear it!"

"You can't find it without my help."

Sterling was beginning to see a ray of hope. He might possibly save his life by promising to return the money.

"Do you take me for a fool?" Yates retorted. "You want to bend me to your purpose, but you can't do it. I have everything fixed for a campaign which shall give me the lion's share. Come with me—no, go you first!"

The outlaw indicated the way he wished his companion to go, and drove him along a sort of miniature gulch at the muzzle of his revolver. Allen was full of wrath, but he knew enough to yield to the fellow's whims for a while.

Turning a point of rock, however, he paused so suddenly that Yates almost ran upon him.

There was ample cause for his emotion. Before him was Zora Lockyard, bound and confined to a dwarfed tree.

Her sudden disappearance was explained; she had fallen into the hands of the outlaw.

"Steady, now!" added the latter. "Don't get any heathen doctrines into your head and make a fool of yourself. You see I hold the reins in this race. The girl is my prisoner and

so are you. Make one hostile movement, and I will blow out your brains!"

Yates moved around so as to face them both, and stood smiling mockingly. A brief silence followed. Zora had looked quickly from one man to the other, and already understood the situation. Allen's face was stern and rebellious, but he was unarmed and at the mercy of his companion. And what the latter was, Zora had already discovered to her sorrow.

"Well, what are you going to do?" Yates flunily asked.

"I have a proposal to make," Allen slowly said.

"What is it?"

"I will meet you in fight, as man to man, and let the victory be to the fittest."

"Do you take me for a fool? No; I have the upper hand and I mean to keep it."

"Are you afraid?"

"Never mind; I shall not throw away my advantage. I am about to send you out of the world, young man. I have the way and the will, and the fact that you are alive now is because I wanted you to see that your lady-love was in trouble."

He pointed to Zora, but for once the girl had nothing to say. Her heart felt like lead in her bosom. She knew Allen's danger, and she knew her own.

Allen, however, had no intention of dying without a struggle. The chances were against him, but it would be cowardly to yield without an effort in his own behalf.

"One word," he said. "What are you going to do with this young lady?"

"Marry her!" replied Yates, promptly, though, in point of fact, he had no definite plan, having seized her because she happened to fall into his power.

"You'll find it a lively honeymoon if you do!" Zora retorted.

It was just the turn of affairs for which Allen had hoped. Yates turned his gaze upon her, and the chance was not lost by Allen. With a quick leap he flung himself upon the outlaw, grasping his revolver, and as they reeled back Yates's foot struck against a stone and he fell, while the weapon went flying away.

The men went down together, but in such a way that neither gained an advantage. A move more and they were mixed up in a desperate grapple and whirling about like two tops.

Zora sprang to her feet and tried desperately to break her bonds. Her feet were not secured and, had she not been tied to the tree, she might have made good her escape. As it was, she pulled in vain at the cords Yates had well secured.

Useless as this course proved to be, she tried the next best thing and screamed for help.

Both men heard her, but it made no difference just then. They were struggling like panthers in a death-grapple, and so well were they matched every effort was needed to avoid defeat.

With Yates it had become a desperate fight. They were so near the village that the girl's cries would surely be heard, and if help came, or Allen won the grapple, it would go hard with him. The blood of Big Nugget Bend was up and Judge Lynch was liable to take a hand in the game.

The outlaw put forth every effort and the combat became still hotter. They whirled about so rapidly that it was difficult to follow their movements; with teeth closely shut and labored breathing they strove for victory.

Suddenly the grasp on Yates relaxed. Allen's hands fell down and he lay motionless. Yates sprang to his feet. He needed no explanation of the situation; his enemy's head had struck against a stone and he lay senseless.

Yates looked for his revolver, resolved to finish the affair once and forever; but, close at hand, a voice answered Zora's continued screaming and the fellow saw his danger.

His resolution was quickly taken.

He sprang toward Zora, tore away her bonds and forced her to accompany him. Through the gulch they went, the girl being almost completely carried and unable to resist, since her hands were still confined. A few yards away a horse stood in a niche, where he had been left by Yates. The animal was well trained, and though he was tossing his head with excitement he would not leave the place.

The outlaw lifted the girl to the saddle, sprang up after her, gave the word to the horse and hastened away at all possible speed. The way was rough, but Ten-Mile Valley was not far away, and he had no fear if he could once get out of rifle-shot.

The ring of his horse's noofs had barely ceased to be audible, when the man who had answered Zora's cries appeared in the gulch, his face flushed with the effort he had made.

It was Deacon Stonefist!

He looked eagerly about, and then, seeing Allen, hastened to his side. It was his first idea that the young man had been killed, but a brief examination served to satisfy him on that point. Yet, on another he did not seem at ease. He arose, and looked anxiously about. He had

heard a woman's cries, but no woman was visible.

Once, he started several steps away, as though to make a search, but dead silence reigned around and he returned to the unconscious man.

There was no water near, with which to revive him; but, luckily, none was needed. Allen gave signs of returning consciousness; and, held in Blake's arms, soon revived. He came back to life with a gasp and shiver, but his mind was clear and he flashed a quick glance around.

"Zora!" he exclaimed.

"What of her?" Blake anxiously asked.

Allen staggered to his feet.

"She has been abducted!" he declared, after another look toward the dwarfed tree. "Quick, Blake, or it will be too late!"

"Be calm, but speak quickly," said the Deacon, in a peculiar, hushed voice. "What has happened?—where is Zora?"

"Abducted!" answered the younger man. "Yates had seized her, and I gave him battle. My head struck against a stone, and I was dashed senseless. He has taken her away!"

Not another word did Stonefist utter. He ran along the gulch in the direction opposite to the one from which he had come, and Allen followed close at his heels.

The gulch was not long, and they soon reached a smoother place. From there, looking down, they saw a horse galloping through a second gulch. It was doubly loaded, and it needed no magician to tell that it was Zora and her captor.

Blake's face was strangely convulsed, but not for a moment did he lose his presence of mind.

"The villain will take to the valley!" he said. "Quick, Sterling; go to the village, get the two best horses you can find, and ride with all speed to the tall tree yonder. I will keep them in sight, and meet you there."

Terse as his commands were, they covered the whole ground, and Allen started to obey without a word.

As he shot away toward the village, Blake went more leisurely down the hill, taking care not to lose sight of the kidnapper for a moment.

Yates had a choice of two ways—to remain among the hills and be satisfied with slow progress and a chance to play hide-and-seek, or to take the Ten-Mile Valley and meet sure pursuit. He chose the latter, as Blake had expected.

The latter went to the tree where he was to meet Allen, and looked back anxiously. To look at his face then one would not have thought him a disciple of peace—his expression was more befitting an ordinary avenger.

It seemed a long wait for his ally, yet Allen came quickly. He led two excellent horses. Blake sprang into the empty saddle with the skill and agility of a cowboy, and the two dashed away.

The kidnapper was making for the western hills. If he once gained this cover, his chance for success was good; their's seemed to lie in running him down on the plain.

And so the race began, with all three horses going at full speed. Strong hopes the pursuers had at first, for the leading horse was doubly laden, but it showed a remarkable speed, and held its own gallantly.

"But," said Allen, between his teeth, "we shall run it down before the ten miles are traversed; we must, or Zora's fate is sealed!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

ON THE KIDNAPPER'S TRAIL.

NEVER before had Ten-Mile Valley seen such a race. Hemmed in on three sides by towering peaks, braced, as it were, by rough foothills, it was a beautiful region down which the miners had once hoped Big Nugget Bend might extend and be the rival of Deadville, but the town had not prospered and the Valley was still a thing of Nature.

But the footing was good, and on this day the rival horses sped along urged by frequent words, if not with blows.

The horse of the kidnapper was a splendid animal and he spared no effort to obey his master's will. With nose outstretched and never turning his head he swept down the valley, his flying feet scarce seeming to touch the ground.

In the rear the pursuers followed with all the speed they could get from their animals, but not a foot did they seem to gain. All depended on the endurance of the three.

Few words passed between Blake and Allen, but, once, when the latter turned his head, he was struck by the tense, anxious look on Stonefist's face. Clearly, he had entered into the pursuit with even more zeal than when he tried to reform the Bend by pointing out their sins.

Five miles were soon covered, but without a perceptible change in the relative positions of the two parties.

Allen turned to his companion.

"Shall we succeed?" he asked.

"We must not fail," the reformer answered, but in a voice wholly unlike his usual severe, incisive tones.

"Unluckily, our horses are but flesh and blood, while Yates's beast goes like a phantom steed. Only a complete break-down can lose the race to him."

"Can you follow a trail?"

"To a certain degree, yes. I have been among the Indians somewhat in old times. As long as Yates hangs to his horse he cannot throw me off the track, but to follow his own trail is beyond my skill. And you?"

"I know nothing about the art."

The race went on; the mountains grew nearer and the leading horse held his own gallantly. A scornful smile came to Yates's face and he turned and waved his hand derisively toward his pursuers. They made no answer, but urged their horses to fresh efforts.

The effort was made in vain; the abductor struck the foothills with a good lead and disappeared behind a fringe of trees. Beyond them were the ragged gulches and ravines where there were hundreds of chances for him to hide.

Again Allen glanced at Blake, but the strong face was drawn into a series of frowns and the steel-like eyes set for a point directly ahead, where the kidnapper had last been seen. They reached the place themselves, with foaming and exhausted horses. They dashed in among the trees.

The leading horse stood panting by a ledge but his master and Zora had disappeared.

The pursuers drew rein at the same place.

"What now?" Blake sharply asked.

"Heaven knows; I don't!" Allen confessed.

Stonefist leaped from his horse and surveyed the ground ahead of them with an eagle-like glance. He was looking for the way Yates would have been most likely to take and, forming his opinion, he ran up the ledge.

He was following a fissure along which ran a vein of earth! So far his judgment had been correct, for in more than one place they found the mark of heavy heels.

But at the top the clew ended, and they were at a loss. By Blake's advice they separated and, keeping a hundred feet apart, ran up the ascent beyond.

It was a mere chance, but Blake's eyes were always busy and he caught sight of the fugitives away to the left. Both were there, Yates and Zora, and he saw them plainly. One moment they were visible and then some intervening object hid them from view.

A call to Allen brought him after his companions and they increased their speed and dashed recklessly along the rough way. Blake led, and his companion had to use every effort to keep near him.

Several minutes passed in this wild race, but they did not again sight the pursued until their notice was called in a manner which came near making an end of Allen. The crack of a rifle rung out above them and a bullet brushed the young man's hair. Another inch to the left and it would have plowed its way through his temple.

They looked up quickly.

Above them arose a cliff which at first sight seemed impassable, but a closer survey would show a shelf of rock running along the side. And on the shelf stood Yates, his rifle still in his hands. It was safe enough for him to show himself, for they had no rifle and he was beyond revolver-shot.

"Here I am!" he cried, with a mocking laugh. "You ran you race hotly, but now you have the quarry at bay, let me see you take him. I am ready!"

Blake and Allen used their eyes to advantage and quickly summed up the situation. The shelf ended just beyond where the outlaw stood, with an opening like a cave-entrance behind him. There was but one way of reaching the place, and that the shelf along which he had gone.

"Where is your prisoner, dog?" Blake shouted.

Yates laughed and disappeared momentarily from view. He reappeared, holding Zora in his arms. Helpless she certainly was, but they could see, even then, that a brave look was on her face.

"We are all here," said Yates, derisively.

"If you want us, come our way."

"You shall see us, never fear," answered Allen, hotly.

"Nothing will oblige me more, and I particularly want you, my man. Look at this shelf of rock! It is the only road to my eyrie, and I could hold it against an army. Try your luck in getting at me."

"Listen!" said Blake. "Release the girl and you shall go free."

"Your kindness is remarkable, but I am here to make terms, not to accept them. I defy you, both. More than this, I am about to carry the war into your own camp."

He disappeared from view, and while they watched for his return Zora's voice suddenly rung out:

"Save yourselves, my friends; he is reloading his rifle!"

It was a timely warning, and they did not neglect it. They ran back to shelter, yet where they could watch the shelf. Yates soon appeared, but he looked in vain for a target for his rifle.

The would-be rescuers consulted. What were they to do? There did not seem to be any way for getting at the desperado, and night was fast approaching. They shivered at the thought of leaving Zora in such company.

"There is just one chance," said Blake, steadily.

"What is that?"

"The cliff must be climbed."

"It is impossible."

"The chances may be against success," replied the reformer, looking at the almost smooth face of the rock steadily, "but, as I have said, it is the only chance. Zora must be rescued! There was a time when I was noted as a climber, and I am still strong and long-winded. I shall make the attempt."

"But you will surely fall and be dashed to pieces at the foot of the cliff."

"In that case," said Blake, in a tense voice, "I shall die in a good cause."

"But, even if you escape that peril, Yates will see and shoot you."

"I must take the risk. The chances are he will not dream of our trying so desperate a venture. He thinks we can only get at him by the ledge. Well, I have a plan by which you shall make a feint in that quarter and keep his attention, while I endeavor to go up the cliff. Say no more, my friend, for my resolution is fixed."

Allen was bewildered. In this crisis Deacon Stonefist had come out as a new individual, and was proving himself a remarkable man; but it seemed rank suicide for him to try his plan. True, the cliff was seamed, here and there, and in some places almost equal to stairs, but as a whole it made a field of action Allen believed no man could enter upon and live.

Arguments were useless, however, and they prepared for the desperate venture.

First of all they made a breastwork to shelter Allen during his operations on the ledge. This was done by cutting a quantity of pine boughs, and making them into a shape like a cotton-bale, with thin, slab-like stones inside to make it bullet-proof. The whole was secured by tough withes, and, though cumbersome, was capable of being rolled by one man as fast as was desired.

This was put in place, and then Blake went around to the foot of the cliff to begin his perilous ascent.

Allen waited until he judged he had begun, and then rolled the breastwork into view. Yates's attention at once became fixed upon it, and as it made a revolution toward him he believed he understood the purpose of his enemies.

For a moment he looked anxious, for if they should roll it to his niche, and then both spring out at once, he might not be able to shoot more than one before the other would shoot in turn, and do him fatal damage; but an idea soon flashed upon his fertile mind, and he ran along the ledge for forty feet, and then pulled a rock, twice the size of his head, out to the middle of the narrow path.

This done, he went back, smiling grimly. He knew the breastwork could not be rolled past there without giving him at least a chance at one of the men, and the other he could pick off at his leisure.

After that he watched the progress of the unwieldy thing without a suspicion that only one man was behind it.

In the meanwhile Bartholomew Blake was toiling up the cliff. He had laid aside his close-fitting coat, and his form was more plainly visible. An observer would have admired it then, even as they would have admired the way in which the man climbed.

Gallantly he fought his way up the sheer rock. At times he had but a narrow crevice for the grasp of his hands; anon, he hung with his whole weight, suspended by his arms; but his resolution never relaxed.

Onward and upward he toiled, every energy bent to the work before him. Already his clothes were rent and his hands bloody, but he heeded no obstacle and pressed on, hanging where a mischance would dash him to death on the rocks below.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

THE STRUGGLE ON THE LEDGE.

YATES had placed Zora well back in the niche—a place he had often been in before, and where food and drink were always kept stored by the outlaw trio to which he belonged—but he stood well out on the shelf and watched the breastwork approach.

He had yet no occasion to fear a revolver from that point, and he watched it advance with supreme scorn.

Had he looked over the cliff he would have been astonished to see a single man clinging to its face, slowly and painfully toiling up, but as resolute as the rock itself.

Blake did not falter. He knew what was at stake and kept on. His hands were cut and bleeding, but he did not heed them. His mind was on Zora and he was resolved to save her.

Not once did he look behind him. Such a course would have been most dangerous, for it might have made him dizzy, but he knew what

was there, well enough; he knew that if he lost his hold and fell sure death awaited him below.

Few men would have had the courage to attempt the feat; fewer, still, the strength to accomplish it. Even Blake was relying more on desperation than anything else, and when the top grew nearer he was met by the probability that Yates would see him first and hurl him over the cliff.

But he would not pause, and with firmly-set teeth he toiled onward and upward.

Sterling had pushed forward the barricade with the best possible judgment. He could not take so much as one look, for he had already seen a specimen of the outlaw's workmanship, but, unknown to him, he was nearing the point where Yates had placed the obstruction.

The latter smiled grimly and, with his rifle ready, awaited the result.

It was at this moment that a human head arose above the edge of the shelf. A human face followed and Blake looked with gleaming eyes at the outlaw. Thus far fortune had favored him, for he was behind Yates. Could he gain the ledge unheard?

Zora was looking out of the recess with despair at her heart, for she forgot all else at first sight of the climber.

She looked in bewilderment and then grew amazed as she saw Deacon Stonefist grasp a point of rock and draw himself to a level.

He was not an inviting looking object. Some of the blood from his cut hands had become smeared over his face and his eyes were wild and fixed. Little strength seemed left him then, but it would not do to pause. With a great effort he rose to his feet, lurched forward and flung all his weight upon Yates, bearing him to the rock.

Another moment and a shout—the pre-arranged signal—aroused Sterling, who quickly arose from his cover.

He saw the two men lying on the ground, Yates making a desperate effort to free himself from Blake's grasp. Under ordinary circumstances he would have been like a child in the hands of a giant, but Blake's splendid strength had been nearly exhausted by that long climb, and he was terribly weak. Only the grand resolution of his nature enabled him to hold fast to the outlaw.

Zora had come forward from the niche, and, still bound at her wrists, was in an agony of fear for her champion, but she uttered a glad cry as she saw Allen bounding to the rescue.

Yates saw him, too, and he struck Blake in the face, but even that did not loosen his tenacious hold.

Another moment and the new-comer had flung himself upon the outlaw and he was again beaten down.

How it would have ended had Blake then given way is uncertain, for Yates was strong and desperate, but he kept his hold and the doubly-hampered desperado was forced flat on his face and secured.

A word to Zora brought her to Allen's side, and the cords were quickly transferred from her wrists to Yates's. Then he was rolled back in the niche and left grating his teeth in impotent rage.

When Allen turned from this work he saw Zora on her knees and holding Blake's head. The latter looked more like a dead man than anything else. With the victory won his strength had all gone, and he lay with closed eyes, his face marble-white, except where the blood from his wounded hands had smeared it.

Zora burst into tears. Her heart was tender and grateful, and, realizing what this man had done for her, and believing him about to die, she could not look with calmness upon him.

But the tears which fell upon his face served to arouse him at once. His eyes opened and he smiled slightly.

"No, no!" he said. "Shed no tears for me, for I shall be well in a moment. It is but exhaustion."

Yet, his eyes closed again at once, and there was little to encourage the girl. She told Allen of the stock of water in the niche and he brought it to wash away the blood-stains. They found no wound except on the reformer's hands, but they were cut in a way which told how terrible had been his climb.

Once, Zora looked over the edge of the cliff and shivered at the high, sheer ascent, and then she went back to her self-imposed task of holding Blake's head.

Allen had found brandy, too, in the niche, and he brought it with some hesitation. After all "Deacon Stonefist" had said against liquor he did not believe he would touch it, but when he mentioned the matter the reformer observed that "all medicine is medicine," and took a long draught.

Consistent, or not, the liquor had a happy effect on him and he soon began to recover strength. He did not seem in a hurry to arise, but as night began to fall unmistakably around them he raised his head from Zora's hold.

She would have bandaged his hands, but he made light of the matter, laughing in a strangely-genial way, and when he found his feet well under him, was the first to speak of returning to the village.

"They went, with Allen in charge of Yates and Blake's arm for Zora's support; for, having no foe but exhaustion to overcome, the reformer had almost regained his old power."

As they toiled down the mountain, Allen vaguely noticed that his friends talked a good deal and without signs of their old difference of opinion, but he wisely gave most of his own attention to the prisoner and to keeping out of the chasms which yawned by the way.

Ten-Mile Valley was reached without further accident and the horses found where they had been left. As some horse must bear double burden, the same as during the race, it came to pass that Zora rode with Blake.

So far as could be seen they quarreled none on the way; if they did it was in tones so low that Allen heard nothing.

Yates, still guarded by his old enemy, went in sullen silence. There was no knowing what a night would bring forth for him, in a land where lynching is not unusual, but he would not ask for mercy.

Big Nugget Bend was reached in due time, but none too soon to save Lockyard's reason, if appearances were reliable. Beset on all sides as he had been, of late, Zora's disappearance was the last feather to his load. Allen had gone on the pursuit too hastily to see any one about the matter, so it was not known in town what had become of her until she returned.

She found Althea at the house, drawn there by a desire to comfort the sorrowing money-lender, and Zora was very kind to her for Allen Sterling's sake and insisted on her remaining all night.

Althea flushed a little at the idea, for she knew Sterling would soon be there, but Zora would not listen to a refusal and the teacher remained.

Allen had seen Yates safely confined with their other prisoners before returning to the office. He had tried in vain to bring Blake, but he was not sorry when he saw Althea. In his opinion, her company made amends for any other loss.

They met with a slight embarrassment on both sides, for they could not help feeling that it was the beginning of a new relationship between them, but Althea made a march to cover her confusion, at once.

"You should have been a knight of the days of chivalry, Mr. Sterling," she said. "You seem especially created for a brave and devoted defender."

"I suppose you refer now to my services in your behalf; but it would be a contemptible knight that was not stirred to heroic effort for such a 'lady fair'—if you will allow the old term."

"I dare not reprove you, since I am so much in your debt, but if I have read history and romance aright, knights have before now been deceived by the 'ladies fair' for whom they fought."

"The remark will not apply to you," Allen declared. "In this case the knight only wishes he was worthy of carrying the scarf of the lady fair, as in the old days."

Althea laughed.

"Very pretty and romantic, but, as a usual thing, romance is nonsense. Don't you think so?"

"I think I prefer reality for shadows, like the majority of people at the present day. But, as regards this last rescue, give credit where it is due. My share was insignificant, for Bartholomew Blake won the prize by a deed unsurpassed in history, ancient or modern."

"Zora has told me something of this; but I thought her gratitude must have made her exaggerate."

"She could not do that," said Allen, warmly; and then he told the story of Blake's climb up the cliff.

It must have been thrillingly told, for Althea followed each phrase with rapt attention, and when he told of the struggle on the ledge the color retreated from her cheeks.

"What the climb itself was we can imagine, for no human eye looked on as that gallant man swung between heaven and earth where one mis-step would have dashed him a mangled mass of flesh on the rocks below."

Allen spoke with a fervor which made the girl shiver.

"He is very brave," she said.

"And they call him a crank!" added Allen.

"He may be odd in his ways—Miss Lawrence, I do not know what to think of him."

"Why so?"

"This last affair has made a great change in his manner, and as he lay on the rock, with Zora weeping over him, he looked at her with an expression not only human, but, I could almost swear, tender. What are we to think; has Deacon Stonefist's heart been touched?"

A peculiar expression flashed over Althea's face, but as Zora joined them the subject was dropped and not renewed again that night.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

THE TUG OF WAR GROWS WARM.

As Big Nugget Bend had no jail Yates was put into the same room where Jack Bunker and Horace Kellogg were confined, Warfield and

Bennett being in a separate cabin. Prisoners were increasing, and at that rate they would soon outnumber their jailers, but the honest men of the town were only awaiting the word of Lawyer Wisecraft to send the whole lot to Denver.

Old Ketchum had gained sudden prominence in the town, and the idea of making him mayor had been openly considered. Just then, however, his head was troubling him a good deal, and he asked them to wait until he could resume operations against the late plotters, letting Blake speak for him in the mean time.

The miners hardly knew what to think of the latter's change of position, but they went with the tide, and felt inclined to use the "crank" well if he would not insult the Bend further.

Yates had no warning of what, or who, he would meet when he was thrust into his cell, but he at once realized that Bunker and Kellogg were prisoners like himself.

Therefore, he nodded to them genially when the door was closed.

"I take it we are all in the same box, gentlemen," he said, "and although it isn't pleasant for any of us, I like good company. And I think I can say why you are here."

Kellogg waited for Bunker to answer, but he did not seem so ready to talk as usual.

"I suppose every one knows," growled Horace.

"But I am not a citizen of the Bend. My name is Yates; you may have heard of me in connection with Warfield."

"Are you in limbo, too?" groaned Horace.

"I am, as you see, and my case is more serious than yours. My latest exploit was to try to carry off pretty Miss Zora, but her friends took me in and here I am."

The two men fell into a conversation in which Bunker took no part. He kept his corner and let the others say what they would, but this did not free him from Yates's attention. The latter looked at him often and with a searching gaze, but Jack remained silent and impassive.

Anon, conversation lagged and Kellogg lay down to sleep. The other men remained awake and often looked at each other, but they did not speak until Kellogg's breathing announced that he was asleep.

Then Yates went to Bunker's side.

"My friend, I know you," he quietly said.

"Wal, what on't?" Jack asked. "Thar's others that do. Who be I, ef you hev me down so fine?"

"Your dialect won't save you; my eyes are keen and I have seen through your disguise, good as it is. You are my partner, Mortimer!" Bunker laughed.

"Well, what of it?" he asked, dropping his illiterate speech.

"Nothing, except that if you had confided in me before you need not have been so badly off now. When you needed help, and wanted Warren and me, why didn't you come to us yourself instead of sending Warfield? You know our old compact—faithfulness to each other and all we can make elsewhere."

"I wished to be unknown to all while operating as Jack Bunker. I have stuck grimly to my assumed character, though I begin to fear other eyes than yours have penetrated it. There is a mystery about this matter I can't understand; I have been repeatedly foiled when I should have succeeded. But, enough of that. Where is Warren?"

"Dead!"

"Dead?"

"Yes."

"This is bad news. How—"

"Not for us," said Yates, with a profane addition. "The scoundrel turned traitor and robbed me of all I had. He was shot by Sterling, and that's the end of Warren. At least, such is Sterling's story, and I am inclined to believe it, though I at first thought Sterling the robber."

"Did you lose much?" Bunker asked.

"Every cent I had," Yates gloomily answered.

"There's a mystery about this matter I don't understand. Tell me all!"

Yates obeyed telling all he knew about Sterling's abduction and the subsequent events at the mountain cabin, except that he gave no particulars as to his money loss. Perhaps the sum was such that he would have been at once branded as faithless to the league of three.

For Mortimer, Yates and Warren, had long been sharpers and robbers in general through the West. Mortimer was the leading spirit, and nearly all their great successes were due to his planning; but he had always been a sort of mystery to his partners. Weeks often passed without a word from him, or the slightest clew to his whereabouts, but he always came around sooner or later and, usually, with some elaborate scheme under consideration.

The men had hung together for years, and they had been faithful to each other until Warren yielded to temptation. Yates had not at first thought him guilty, when he discovered that he was robbed, and had laid all blame to Sterling; but the latter's repeated assertions of the truth had nearly convinced him.

And Mortimer—or Bunker, as we will con-

tinue to call him—having less faith in mankind, was inclined to take the same view of the case.

But their vengeance could never fall on their faithless partner, as we have already seen.

They soon turned their attention to the future. They were in prison but they had no intention of remaining there. Old jail-breakers were they, and they meant to leave Big Nugget Bend in the lurch by another night, Bunker having carefully arranged a plan.

The next day Bunker was taken from the prison and to a room in Father Lockyard's house. He knew as soon as he crossed the threshold that something uncommon was about to occur. It was easy enough to imagine that they wanted a confession of the full plot against the money-lender, but Bunker had another view of the case.

He slouched into the house with an indifferent air and showed no surprise when taken to a room where he saw Lockyard, Zora and Bartholomew Blake. There was another figure partially visible by a curtained window which he was not able to recognize.

The men who had brought him stepped outside the room and Blake then spoke, his cold eyes and impassive face turned squarely upon the plotter.

"You may sit down, sir," he said, steadily.

"An' I reckon I kin stand up ef I want'er," independently replied Jack. "I ain't nobody's—"

"Suit yourself, as to that; it is of no consequence to any one except yourself."

"Thank ye fur nothin'. It's right kind in ye, Deacon Stonefist, an' I see ther crank fam'ly ain't so bad arter all."

So Bunker sat down, throwing one leg over the other and taking a good deal of trouble to show these people that he did not care a picayune for their likes or dislikes.

Blake, however, remained perfectly calm and showed no resentment at his sneers.

"We have sent for you on business," the Deacon resumed, "and I will lose no time about it. To begin with, you may as well drop your illiterate way of talking, for all here know you to be, not Jack Bunker, but Warren Lockyard!"

If any one had expected the man to make a guilty start, they were disappointed. Jack heard the announcement unmoved, and then a slight smile crossed his face.

"Well, what of it?" he asked, in a tone different from his old Western dialect style.

"Simply this: You are now known to us as the brother of this gentleman, Nathan Lockyard!"

"Why don't he rush to my arms?" sneered Jack, as we will still call him.

"He is not fond of embracing reptiles," Blake coolly replied. "Now, let me see what we can tell about you. Arnold Lockyard had three sons, William, Nathan and Warren, the latter being his child by a second marriage and several years younger than William and Nathan. He was also of a very different nature, growing up vicious and dissipated, while they were steady, industrious and deserving."

"A good beginning, upon my word!"

"When the elder Lockyard died, Warren was eighteen years of age. There was little property for the brothers, but as the two elder were doing well in business, they offered to make Warren an important factor in their business, and ultimately a partner, if he would abandon his evil ways."

"Which he did, of course."

"He promised fairly, and was tried," continued Blake calmly, "but he failed to keep his promise. They bore with him for a year, during which time he was a disgrace to himself and them, and then, when repeated warnings had failed, they set him adrift. He at once disappeared."

"Driven to suicide by their ill-treatment, probably."

"It was many years before they heard of him again. They dissolved their co-partnership, and each went his way. Years passed, William, the elder brother, was at his home, old and feeble, but surrounded by all money could procure. His uncle had died, and left nearly two hundred thousand dollars to his two elder nephews, William and Nathan. The former was in the midst of his comforts, with age stealing upon him gradually, when he had a shock of paralysis which enfeebled both his mind and body. He was in this condition when Warren unexpectedly reappeared."

"Refer to me more directly, if you please. I am getting bewildered, so complicated is your narrative," answered the prisoner.

"Have it as you will. You came to your brother's house, and by fair talk made him believe you an honorable man. William, at that time, was alone, I have said, so far as relatives were concerned. So he was, for his son and daughter had gone to Europe a year before to pursue their studies in Germany. William told you these young people were dead, having been lost at sea, and you believed him. Of them, more anon. Enough for now that, by your advice, William turned over all his wealth into ready money. What excuse you made I do not

know, but you worked on his disease-enfeebled mind until you accomplished your purpose."

"The interest increases. Go on!"

"One evening, William died suddenly. You made loud protestations of sorrow, but when morning came you were gone, and so was all the money you had prevailed on him to put in portable form. In plainer words, you had accomplished your end, and deliberately stolen nearly a hundred thousand dollars!"

CHAPTER XXXIX.

THE LAST CHANCE.

Up to this time Blake had remained as calm as a statue, but now his face flushed a little, and his words were bitter and his manner ominous.

But the prisoner yawned, as though the story wearied him, and carelessly asked him to go on.

"In plain words," Blake resumed, "you had heard of the fortune left your two brothers, and filled with rage and jealousy that you were slighted, you resolved to secure by foul means, what you had not, by any course of justice deserved. Your first step was to steal the hundred thousand dollars from William, as I have said."

"Which was well done, according to your account," added Bunker, nonchalantly.

"After that, you came to Big Nugget Bend to rob Nathan of his share. You disguised yourself and became rough, illiterate Jack Bunker. Then you started the Quickstep mine fraud. At first Nathan thought well of it, but you were foiled in the end."

"Now you begin to interest me. Give me light on this dark subject. Who foiled me?"

"I will tell you."

Blake struck his foot on the floor and the window curtain was pushed aside. The half-concealed figure appeared, and Bunker saw Althea Lawrence!

"Let me introduce to you, Brenda, daughter of William Lockyard!" added Blake.

"Ho! I see!" said Bunker, with some excitement, yet with less surprise than might have been expected. "The old man's daughter was not lost at sea?"

"She was not; for here she is, as you may see."

Jack scanned the face of the teacher, who met his gaze calmly, for several seconds in silence, but at last he turned to Blake again.

"I believe you," he said, quietly. "The resemblance is not at all strong, but it is there in a slight degree. Yet, I have seen her every day for weeks and never suspected it. Well, since this is so, perhaps the son of William Lockyard still lives!"

He looked keenly at Blake.

"Yes," replied the latter, calmly. "I am Ward Lockyard!"

Every one except Jack and Althea started, for it was a surprise to Nathan and Zora. A part of the truth had been told them, but not until then did the money-lender suspect Blake was the son of his brother.

"From which," continued Jack, "I judge your career as Deacon Stonefist has been but a blind and that you are not a crank in the sense you have the reputation of being."

"It has been a shield behind which I have worked against you," Blake answered. "When my father told you his children were lost at sea, it was but the fancy of an enfeebled mind. I was then studying medicine in Germany, and my sister, Brenda, was receiving vocal instruction. We were summoned home immediately after my father was taken ill, but when we arrived he was past earthly help and earthly trouble, and—you had stolen the money and disappeared!"

"I begin to see," said Jack, coolly. "And so you and your charming sister resolved to find me and ask for the return of the money. Am I right?"

"You are, sir."

"Well, my dear nephew, I can't oblige you. Perhaps brother Nate will lend you enough money to take you home; it is in his way of trade."

"I am not here to borrow; I demand my own!"

"Sorry, but you'll never get it."

"Unless you refund every dollar you will be taken East and tried for your crime."

"You can prove nothing."

"You will see that I can prove enough to send you to prison for the remainder of your life, and I will do it unless you give back the money. Listen to me, sir. I swore a solemn oath by the grave of my father that I would find you, though I was ten years on the trail, and, having found you, would force you to make restitution. I will do this or send you to prison for the balance of your days. I swear it!"

"Soft and slow!" said Jack, mockingly.

"You talk briskly for a boy, but you have an old head to fight against when you meet me. If I have the money—notice my mode of expression—if I have it, 'tis where all your sagacity will fail to find it. I do not carry it about me like a pipe, and I defy you to find one dollar of all the hundred thousand!"

"Think twice before you answer," said Blake harshly. "I know you and your way, and that mercy is thrown away on you. One word from me to the men of Big Nugget Bend and Judge Lynch takes the reins of power. You were at the bottom of the plot to kill Allen Sterling, though it was Warfield who hired Yates and Warren for the work; you were at the bottom of the scheme to lynch me, though you let Hexam work for you. Such things as these get due notice in a Western town when found out; let me but make the suggestion and Judge Lynch rules the Bend to-night!"

Jack's manner was less confident than before.

"How in perdition did you learn all this?" he muttered.

"You have been over-reached, that's all. Often, when you talked, a man was near whom you despised as a mere drunkard. You knew him as Daddy Clover. There is no such person. I have a part of the time assumed that role, while on other occasions it was my good friend, Bardeck, *alias* Wisecraft, *alias* Old Ketchum. He accompanied us here, when I came with my sister—or, rather, each one of us came at a different time. And when you have talked freely with Daddy Clover around, either Old Ketchum or myself overheard you."

"Well, you haven't got the money yet!" sneered Jack.

"No; but we have been able to foil all your plots against Nathan Lockyard. Each scheme you laid was early known to us and duly baffled."

"You've played it well, I confess. Why, you even pretended to be a stranger to this young woman you now claim for your sister."

He motioned to Althea.

"It was a part of our plan, and even when we were alone I kept up the pretense of being Bartholomew Blake so that no chance listeners would learn the truth."

"But where's your money?" cried Jack.

"You shall refund it."

"I will not!"

"Beware!"

"I say I will not!"

The two men looked each other in the face. It was, indeed, a "tug of war," with Greek against Greek, and no one could tell who would win. Stern resolution was expressed on each face.

"Have you an ambition to pass the remainder of your life in prison?" demanded the younger man.

"I was never yet beaten in a game of wits, and I will not begin by losing now. Do with me as you will; not a syllable shall my tongue ever reveal!"

Blake looked him in the face for a full minute in silence.

"Have your own way," he then said, "but if you decide to confess, let me know. To-morrow, at noon, you will be started for Denver. Let me hope for your own sake you will change your mind before then."

"It isn't my way to change, and I wish you joy of the money when you get it. Brother Nate, I fear I shall have to leave you rolling in your riches, for the Quickstep mine has struck bed-rock and I advise you not to put any money in it. Cutaway City is so much out. My charming niece, Althea, or whatever you call yourself, if you want more pupils, come to your old uncle for recommendations. He is the man who wields the rod of power at the Bend. Pretty Zora, adopted daughter of a philanthropic old fossil, accept my blessing! And now, by your leave, good people, the black sheep of the Lockyard family steps down and out and the bluff Jack Bunker comes to the surface like a jumping-jack. Drive on yer cart, durn ye, an' make elbow room fur ther wild hoss o' ther prairie. Thet's me, an' what I sez goes as it lays!"

He poured forth this address with the volubility of an auctioneer, his manner one of vulgar triumph, and at the end resumed his old, illiterate language as a circus-performer would change his dress.

The guards from the prison had entered at a signal from Blake, and he motioned in silence for them to take the man away. He went with his old swagger, turning his head at the door to grimace over his shoulder, and then the worthy people he left behind each drew a deep breath.

Nathan went to the ex-"reformer."

"I am surprised," he said, "to learn that you are one of my own race, but I am not sorry. I see now that what we have thought your monomania was but a mask, as I may call it, and I welcome you as William's son."

Blake laughed lightly.

"I trust I am still somewhat human in my ways," he said. "I have stuck grimly to my character, often when I ought to have been ashamed of doing so."

He looked at Zora, who blushed prettily, and seemed to take kindly to the idea of having a sane friend, in place of the crank of the Bend. And when matters had settled down to a calmer basis, he went to her as she sat apart from the others.

"Can you forgive me for all my rudeness to

you?" he asked; "for annoying you so often by declaring you were vain and worldly?"

She touched his hands where they were bruised by the cliff he had climbed so gallantly.

"Let these wounds answer me," she said, softly. "Even before that I could not hate you when I tried, and since you risked your life for me I have lost all desire to be your enemy. For my own part, I have been disagreeable; I know I have, and I shall try to treat you better since you are father's nephew. But perhaps you don't know I am not Mr. Lockyard's daughter."

"I have known it a long time, and it was because I let the secret drop to Old Ketchum that he stupidly spoke of it to your father—let us call him so—and made trouble for both of you. For this I hope you will forgive me, and let peace be between us."

"I am quite willing."

"There is one condition. I especially request that you put off this black dress and put on your plaid one."

"But you said that was vain and worldly—"

"Deacon Stonefist said so, but he is a thing of the past, and in my proper character I ask to see the worldly dress again."

CHAPTER XL.

THE LAST ACT IN THE DRAMA.

ANOTHER night had fallen over Big Nugget Bend—a night of unusual darkness, with a threatening of rain. The hour was midnight, and the greater part of the people were abed.

In the prison-room set apart for Jack Bunker, Kellogg and Yates, there was no sleep. Instead, each man was in a state of eager expectancy such as he had seldom felt before.

No light was furnished them, and they could not see each other, but they knew what needed to be done, and were of one mind.

All their attention was directed to escape.

The building in which they were confined was larger than the average, and they were endeavoring to escape by the roof. Bunker, who was, as usual, the master-spirit of all, was taking the lead with energy.

The way to the roof was one not easy to travel at any time, while in the darkness it was not only difficult but dangerous; but they had worked the way by day, and were traveling it at night.

Jack went first and, after swinging to and fro like a pendulum for awhile, reached a position at the top and began opening the way to the outer world; and while he labored, the other men followed by the aerial way.

At last an opening was made and they crawled out on the roof. Big Nugget Bend lay dark and silent around them, except for the tramp of a single man as he marched around the prison.

Not a word passed between the desperate men, for every point had been considered and settled in advance by Bunker. He crept to the edge of the roof and looked down.

The sentinel paused for a moment to light his pipe. It may be he was envying his companions in the outer room of the jail and longing for the hour when he would be relieved, but the pipe was good company and he tramped on after creating a red coal within the bowl.

As he rounded the corner Bunker dropped lightly to the ground and ran for the shelter of the nearest cabin.

By the time the guard reappeared, all was as before.

Once, twice more the man made his round, and then, though he knew it not, he might have gone home and to bed for all the good he was doing. The last of the prisoners was gone, though he dreamed not of it.

They paused a hundred feet away and Bunker took each man by the hand.

"Now, then, pards," he said, "do you stick by me through thick an' thin? Kellogg, ez I've tole ye before, all yer uncle's money is in his house, for he bragged on it ter me; an' thar, Yates, is Sterling with what he stole from you. I want revenge! What say, do we crack ther crib an' make ther Lockyard bones shake?"

His companions promptly answered affirmatively, as usual, but, as usual, they were his dupes. The money-lender had not told him he had money in the house, and he knew nothing about Yates's money, but he was resolved to bring ruin and destruction to the Lockyard family that night.

He led the way to the house, chuckling with suppressed joy at the way his plans were working. Big Nugget Bend had laid its hand on him, but it should find to its sorrow that he was better left alone.

Lockyard's house was reached. It was dark and silent, and the whole family seemed buried in sleep.

No time was lost by the desperadoes, as their escape might be discovered.

At one side of the house was a can-to, the roof of which was easily gained. Within easy reach was a window, which Horace was positive led into a room not occupied as a sleeping-room.

In taking this for granted, they forgot that when Lockyard took his newly-found nephew and niece into the house some changes might be

made in the arrangement. Such a change had been made, and Allen Sterling was sleeping in the room.

Bunker cautiously raised the window and then paused to listen. No sound reached his ears. Yates grasped the window to hold it and the chief villain crept cautiously through. He had his revolver ready for use, and a smile moved his face as he thought that he was snugly in the stronghold of his enemies.

Kellogg followed and then turned to hold the window while Yates entered.

At this moment, however, there was a stir at one side and a sharply-pitched voice demanded:

"Who is there?"

A double click followed as Bunker pulled back the hammer of his revolver and sprung forward to silence the speaker, whom he easily recognized as Allen Sterling.

The tell-tale sound settled all doubts remaining in the young man's mind, and as he saw the ruffian rushing upon him he promptly fired the revolver he held in his own hand.

Crack!

The bullet sped wide of its mark and Bunker kept on, his revolver shoved forward for use, but just as he pulled the trigger the window went down with a crash, disturbing his nerves and his aim.

Two other reports sounded in rapid succession, followed by a heavy fall, and then Allen leaped from his bed. Jack Bunker was down and groans sounded from beside the window, and, not a little disturbed, Allen retreated to the corner and stood at bay, not anxious for further fighting, but prepared to shoot rather than be shot.

But, by that time, the whole household was astir and heavy footfalls sounded in the hall. The door was flung open and Blake appeared, a light in one hand and a revolver in the other.

There was no occasion for further fighting, however, Jack Bunker lay by the bed and seemed to be dead, while at the window Kellogg was crouching down and groaning as only a coward can.

Nathan Lockyard quickly entered, but it was Blake who took charge of affairs. He saw that Kellogg was not dangerously hurt, and, giving him in charge of Allen, he went to Bunker.

The latter opened his eyes at the touch, but when he would have raised his hand it fell back like a lump of lead.

"Useless!" he muttered. "I've reached the end at last!"

They saw a red pool gathering by his side, but when they would have looked at his wound he put them away.

"Useless!" he repeated. "The bullet has gone home and I am a dead man. You won't have any more trouble from me, for this night is my last."

Zora and Althea left a scene that shocked and sickened them, but, while Lockyard bound up the wounded shoulder of the groveling Horace, Blake and Allen stayed by the dying outlaw.

"I'm off on a long road," said the latter, looking at Blake, "but I have one satisfaction; you will never see the money for which you have worked so hard."

"Will injustice do you any good now?" Blake gravely asked.

"I say you shall never have the money. I told you once it was not buried, but it is, and that, too, where you will never find it. Ninety thousand dollars, in paper money which will soon decay, and so ends the family feud!"

Allen Sterling started.

"Ninety thousand dollars!" he repeated.

"And deeply buried," chuckled Bunker.

"By my life, I see it all!" Allen exclaimed.

"You are Mortimer, the confederate of Yates and Warren, as you were overheard to say when in prison; and the money Warren dug up in the old stable, where it was buried in a tin box, was the ninety thousand dollars to which you refer. I have come into possession of it; I took it from Warren; it is here! And you, Blake—if you had told me all, might sooner have had your own. It is here!"

He produced the huge roll of green-backed notes and banded them to his companion.

Bunker saw them and his eyes dilated for a moment, but his life was going fast. He merely moaned like a dumb animal in pain, and then hid his face in his arm. He did not move again for several minutes, and when they spoke to him he was found to be dead.

But the Lockyard money was indeed in rightful hands at last, as was proved to the satisfaction of all when the old stable on the mountain was visited. There they found the tin box, which Allen had not particularly examined before, and not only old Blake remember it as having come from his father's house, but the name of William Lockyard was found on the cover in ornamental, but nearly obliterated letters.

The money stolen by Warren from Yates was but a small sum, although the latter made a good deal of talk about it, and as it was never seen again, as far as was known, it was probably lost by Warren while pursuing Allen that night.

And thus the mountain adventure which

...so dearly, was the means of
...the Lockyard money to the son and
daughter of William.

With a farewell glance at our characters we
will bring our record to an end.

With the death of Warren Lockyard, *alias*
Jack Bunker, the troubles of our friends
ceased, though their minds were kept active
during the trial of Kellogg, Warfield and Ben-
nett. All these men received a suitable State's-
prison sentence.

Justice did not reach Yates, who, flying fast
and far after the shooting at Lockyard's, dis-
appeared from the view of those who had
known him before.

"Old Ketchum" recovered and returned East
to finish his days peacefully, and as Nathan
Lockyard was his neighbor there they became
fast friends. The old lawyer sometimes gives
imitations of "Daddy Clover" to amuse cer-
tain children who are growing up around the
younger of our characters.

For Zora became the wife of Ward Lock-
yard, *alias* Blake, and Brenda, *alias* Althea,
married Allen Sterling, so the family fortune
is not likely to be scattered during the present
generation.

It was duly explained that when Ward and
Brenda set out on the trail of their treacherous
uncle, and vowed to follow him to the end, they
also vowed not to think of love until their work
was done.

Thus Althea's coldness toward Sterling was
explained, and he no longer thought her heart-
less when all was told.

As for Ward, he proved to be a very differ-
ent person from "Deacon Stonefist." He cut
off his long hair, let his mustache grow and dis-
carded his peculiar suit, and lo! a very differ-
ent looking young man appeared.

Nor was the change confined to his appear-
ance.

He proved to be of a genial, kind nature, a
man whom all liked, and he no longer calls his
wife vain and worldly. On the contrary, Zora
is encouraged to wear ribbons and other vani-
ties, and their lives flow on like a placid river.

But at Big Nugget Bend the story of Deacon
Stonefist is still told, and old residents point
out the grave of Jack Bunker. The chief curi-
osity, however, is the cliff at the end of Ten-
Mile Valley where Blake climbed for his future
wife, winning her fairly by going up a rock no
other man has been able to scale.

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